A Nova Publication ★ 17th Year of Publication

NEW WORLDS SCIENCE FICTION

May 1963 2/6 Volume 44. No. 130

The Under-Priveleged

Reservation for inferior types of humans

BRIAN W. ALDISS

- **JOHN RACKHAM**
- **RUSS MARKHAM**
- **R. W. MACKELWORTH**

WINDOW ON THE MOON

A serial of the future

E. C. TUBB

●

Guest Editor

LEE HARDING

Brian W. Aldiss

Oxford

Still climbing the ladder of successful authorship, Mr. Aldiss will have another new collection of stories published shortly by Faber & Faber (in USA by Signet) and is hard at work on a new monumental epic novel which we hope to see in the near future.

In Cambridge they're superior and wear their ski hats like this . . .

In Oxford we prefer a lowbrow approach like this . . .

But mine suits me best like this . . .

Get me out of here ! There's a Martian in here like this . .

NEW WORLDS SCIENCE FICTION

VOLUME 44

No. 130

MONTHLY

MAY 1963

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EDITOR : JOHN CARNELL

TWO SHILLINGS AND SIXPENCE

Subscription Rates

12 issues 34/- post free. North American, 12 issues $6.00 post free

Published on the last Friday of each month by

NOVA PUBLICATIONS LTD.,

7 Grape Street, Holborn, London, W.C.2

Telephone : TEMple Bar 3373

Sole distributors in Australia : Gordon & Gotch (Australia) Ltd
in New Zealand : Messrs. P. B. Fisher, 564 Colombo Street Christchurch, N.Z.

Printed in England by Rugby Advertiser Ltd., Albert Street, Rugby

Guest Editorial

Having made something of a name for himself with some very fine short stories in our pages, Australian author Lee Harding now turns his eyes to the general scene of science fiction writing and has some pertinent remarks to make

From The Edge of the Pond

by LEE HARDING

It is now more than a year ago since John Carnell instigated a policy of inviting professional writers to air their views on the science fiction field within these pages. I don't think any of us were surprised when some of the opinions expressed turned out to be, in turn, introspective, belligerent, and, in the case of John Rackham and Brian Aldiss, personally prejudiced and blandly indifferent. And although we have had some fascinating glimpses into the minds of our favourite writers we have seen only isolated fragments of the bewildering science fiction field. At the time of writing, not one of the writers has bothered to take a long backward step and indulge in a good, wide *objective* view of the landscape. They prefer to see its faults with their own pre-occupied eyes.

That is why John Baxter's recent editorial was long overdue, even if it does seem ironical that a reader should be the possessor of an analytical beam capable of throwing a much broader light on the subject than his professional predecessors. He has brought a freshness of viewpoint so necessary to these proceedings, and has cleared the stage with commendable courage for

whatever discussions follow. Let us hope that they do not slip back to the narrowness of introspective pontificating again.

Now, as a science fiction writer, I am not one who depends on it for my ' bread and butter,' as Baxter would put it, but I have followed my favourite form of literature for quite a number of years and am only too aware of what a very small pond it is in the rough sea of literature, as Brian Aldiss has so succinctly put it, and there are a number of things that bother me about it, not only the current state of magazine science fiction, but its general acceptance by that vociferous band of readers known as the fans.

One of the less endearing features of science fiction has always been a certain pretentiousness, and a tendency to fall over itself in an effort to grab hold of a work by a so-called ' mainstream ' writer and hastily gum the label of ' s-f ' upon it, placing it right up there along with the realmof formulae and pulp-inspired writing that has for too long hampered the specialist science fiction magazines, where even now the great god Plottus still clings doggedly to his decaying throne.

From Butler's *Erewhon* right through the whole line of imaginative writing up to Orwell and the novels of Aldous Huxley and Phillip Wylie, this tendency has been grossly perpetrated and shows no signs of being abandoned. Imaginative literature existed long before Gernsback ghettoised science fiction writing into its present form, and will continue to exist *independently* of the magazines for as long as human imagination exists, just as surely as the fantasy story, with its roots firmly implanted amongst the gothic tales of the nineteenth century and the centuries of folklore before that, can claim existence independent of the magazines that grew up around it in a parallel development with the science fiction magazines.

Unfortunately, in recent years, the magazine writers have become obsessed with this idea of s-f being used as a vehicle for social satire, a garden literally overgrown with a multitude of Pohlianish weeds that have all but strangled the life and imagination out of contemporary science fiction. And may I reiterate Edward Mackin's plea, that writers exercise their imagination more often, that their editors encourage them to do so and have the courage to print the result, and to hell with that label of ' space opera ' and those who regard it as some sort of scourge to the field. Perhaps then, and only then, will

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Last month, John Rackham introduced a new type of human character, the 'X'-person, in "Dossier,"— the Extraordinary People. The following story concerns another of these slan-like individuals mixed up in a little matter of discipline.

CONFESSION

by JOHN RACKHAM

Lieutenant Ward watched the five red spots on the glowing plate of the plot, saw them slowly moving, to take up the shape of a five-point star. Thread-lines of yellow light, like the web of some electronic spider, linked them in multiple communication combinations, heightening the effect of the pattern. It was almost beautiful in its precision. Almost, but not quite. To Roger Ward's mind, nothing as precise as this could be beautiful, not when you knew what it was. Such precision was inhuman, made one tend to forget that each spot represented a ship, and that each ship carried one hundred men.

Soon now and with the same meticulous precision, those ships would make touchdown, and would be rapidly converted into temporary bases. The hundreds would split into tens, each ten a unit in its own right, and each unit vigorously and ruthlessly busy. Men—transformed into units, figures in a flow-pattern, items in a strategic array. It would be smoothly done, but the very smoothness could make one forget that these were still flesh and blood men, each with his own capacity for laughter and pain, his hopes and dreams. And it would be wrong to forget a thing like that.

Ward started as Captain Pearson, by his side, made a grunt of satisfaction. "All down and clear. That's a fair start, at

any rate." Pearson moved a toggle-switch to put him in communication with the parent-ship Central Control.

" Training-unit H.Q. to C.C. . . ."

Ward saw, now, that the five reds had become green.

" First stage landing accomplished and clear," Pearson said, with habitual gentleness. " Second stage awaiting your clearance."

" C.C. to H.Q. Training. All clear. Proceed at will, and good luck !"

" Thank you, Control." Pearson replaced the toggle-switch, fingered other buttons in sequence and Ward felt the H.Q. ship shudder as it kicked free of its parent and began the five-hundred mile drop, down into the precise geometrical centre of that five-point group.

" When you have only two weeks," Pearson said, to no-one in particular, " it's just as well to start out right. Makes it easier to keep it that way. Time lost can become lives lost." He coughed, gently. " This your first mission, isn't it, Ward ?"

" Yes, sir," Ward admitted. It was on his tongue to confess, also, that he was beginning to wonder why he had ever let himself in for anything like this, but Captain Pearson never gave him the chance to form the words.

" There's no glamour about it, you know," the Captain said, mildly. " Just a lot of hard work. A hell of a lot of hard work. Single-minded concentration on just one thing—that's the target we aim for. And the only way to achieve it is to keep so damned busy that you haven't any time to think about anything else. It works, too. You'll see. It's tough, of course, but if you keep busy—and get well and truly fatigued—it's satisfying. Exhausts all those other things."

Ward had his doubts and he was not at all sure just what Pearson meant by ' other things,' but he sensed from the tone that the Captain was just making talk, not inviting a debate. The star-pattern had grown huge by now and the first shrill screams of distorted atmosphere came faintly from the hull. There were thousands of things to wonder about. That atmosphere was just one. It was thick, smelly and steam-hot, according to the report. The internal temperature of the ship was rising and would stay uncomfortably hot for the next two weeks. That was one thing. The planetary surface was another. Again going by the report, which was detailed and exhaustive, what passed for solid ground, down there, was

thixotropic. It was solid-seeming, of the consistency of thick dough, until you applied weight, pressure or agitation, whereupon it liquefied and ran like so much syrup. There were other things, too. Almost everything about the planet was a fit subject for wonder and amazement, something to muse upon—but how the devil could you give the proper time and attention to wondering, to savouring the marvellous with the taste-buds of the mind, if you were required to be on the jump all the time?

And what sort of a mind was it that took active steps to combat this natural and engrossing act of wonder? For a long moment, Ward felt utterly alien to his superior officer and his one hundred per cent efficient outlook on life. Again, he had that helpless sense of bewilderment that he had ever let himself be caught up in the military machine.

"Don't fancy your job, though," Pearson said, out of a long silence.

Ward started, again. "I'm sorry, sir," he fumbled. "I don't follow. It's just routine integration, isn't it? I mean, keeping track of files, reports, actions, movements and progress that kind of thing?"

"I wasn't meaning that," Pearson had a mild, level voice. It went well with his plump and pleasant features and served as a perfect mask for his steel-trap unswerving mind. "Not that, at all. No. I meant your on-the-side job as Brigade Morale Officer. Space Regs specify that we have to have a Morale Officer. So we have one and you're it. But there's damn-all you can do, you know . . ."

"I hadn't thought of it quite like that . . ."

"Perhaps not. But you think it through and it's obvious. Everything that organised science and military resources, can do—everything—is being done and has been done, for this operation and the men involved, including you and me. It's all been taken care of. All that's left for you to do is to point it out and try to reason with the gripers. You can't change anything. And there will be gripes and complaints, rest assured of that. Never was a soldier yet who couldn't find something to moan about. And they'll come to you. And you won't be able to do a damn thing except extend sympathy. Frustrating job, but somebody has to do it."

That mildly reflective voice had the most uncanny gift of complete assurance. Ward was still trying to break a way

through the circle of reasoning as the H.Q. ship settled, silently and slurpily, into position. Stilt-like legs drove deep into the chocolate-brown ooze to find bed-rock, some fifteen feet below. Ribbed plates were efficiently assembled and laid out. All was haste and bustle, but the activity swirled past Ward, touching only the outer fringes of his mind, affecting him no more that the aimless eddy of shadows.

Each ship was little more than a hoist-unit, capable of lifting and lowering a full cargo of men and equipment and designed to be readily segmentable into ten-man living units, linked by cable to a central power-and-light source. The H.Q. ship differed from the rest only in that it broke apart into store-sheds, offices and cabins for Captain Pearson and his executive staff, and one N.C.O.'s messroom-and-billet. Without really noticing how it was done, Ward found himself settled into a space apart, a large box, walled with dull-glitter aluminium and glow-panels and furnished with record-cabinets, a computer-complex and a desk. On one edge of the desk a screen glowed greenly, showing a clock-face and as Ward looked at it, the legend shimmered across the surface "Briefing in five minutes. Attend Brigade Office. Briefing in five minutes. Attend . . ."

Ward suddenly shivered, and came out of his mental fog. This was real and immediate. The time for roaming the intriguing corridors of the mind was over. He stood up, wondering at his shiver, because it was hot, suffocatingly so. He realised, with a shock, that he was wet with sweat, even though the efficient air-conditioning unit was purring away. Two weeks of this ! He moved to the door, slid it open and quailed at the fetid blast that struck him. This, the raw atmosphere, was twice as hot as that which had filtered through his air-conditioner and it smelled. It was a scent made up of many things, some sweet, some sour, and the combined effect was to make his stomach retch immediately. In that nauseated moment, something inside him grew very small and cried ' What am I doing here ?'

Suddenly remote from his senses, he watched himself shut the door again and stoop to reach the clip-on flippers that were standard equipment for walking outside. He fitted them over his feet, straightened up, opened the door again and plunged out, into a gasping hot haze of many colours and weird smells, with dull shouts, yells and hints of great activity

going on just out of sight. Walking was a treacherous business and trying on the ankles, until he got the hang of it. Chemiluminiscent arrows glowed in the swirling mist of this permanent twilight, to point his way. Dream-like moments later he had reached Captain Pearson's office, the H.Q. and nerve-centre of the operation.

Others were there before him. He saw Wiggins, the medical officer, and East, technical and communications specialist. They looked, not exactly bored, but resigned. They had done all this before. Then Pearson nodded and waved him to a seat. The Captain looked businesslike, turned back to his desk-speaker and moved a switch.

" Your attention, please," he said, still in that mild, unstressed voice. " This is Captain Pearson speaking. The training session begins as of this moment. So that no valuable time may be lost I want you to know exactly what we are about and what is expected of you. Most of you will have heard rumours and gossip by the grape-vine. *This* is official.

" This planet is Taxile. It is uninhabited, by higher life-forms, that is. Now that you have tasted the conditions, you won't wonder at that. But, this planet is almost a carbon-copy of another planet, Plion, which you will have heard of and which *is* inhabited. Which has been settled, for the past fifty years, by human colonists. Earth-people like ourselves.

" Now, as most of you will know, the Plion colonists have revolted against the Planetary Federal Government. Why they have chosen to do this is none of our affair. We are not concerned with the political ramifications of the silly business. Only the facts concern us. That revolt is still going on. It is an ugly situation. If it is not checked, and quickly, it will get much nastier. Already there has been violence, destruction and killing, on both sides. Our job is a simple one. Brigades have gone ahead of us, others will follow after; we will form part of a special striking force, with one objective only—to nip this whole business off short and to stop it, as quickly and painlessly as possible. Not until peace has been restored can there be any sensible discussion and a settlement. We want that. We want it quickly.

" That means, simply, maximum efficiency on our part. We have the equivalent of two earth-weeks. In that time, we must become as efficient as possible, in these conditions, which are a duplicate of those which exist on Plion. We have little time. We can't afford to waste any of it. You will be serving

the best interests of sanity, peaceful government, and your own future and comfort—to say nothing of your safety—if you buckle down to it, pay attention to your section N.C.O.'s—*and get on with it.* Two weeks can be a hell of a long time if you drag your feet. It can whip by very quickly if you co-operate. It is up to you. That is all."

Pearson broke the circuit, leaned back and sighed. " And let us all hope that we haven't drawn too many left-footed morons, this time. I suppose there must be *some*, in the nature of things, but not too many please !" He twisted in his chair to look at Wiggins.

" How are they, by your figures, Doc ?"

" Oh . . ." Wiggins shrugged, and leaned forward to put a wad of forms on the desk. " They all come well within the standard spread, you know. Physically fine. One or two of them seem a bit dim, mentally, but that's not important."

Pearson swept the forms in a steady motion across his desk to Ward' and smiled. " Yours, I think," he said. " Basic data for your machines. Anything else ?" He cocked an eyebrow at the others and they got up hastily. East, small and very dapper for all the oppressive heat, made a formal salute and begged to be excused, having a thousand and one things to check over. Wiggins, much more casually, made caustic guesses as to the probable fate of his culture-cabinets if he didn't personally go and supervise their future. Ward wondered if he, too, ought to mumble some excuse, and leave, but Pearson waved him to remain. As the door closed after the two Lieutenants, the Captain smiled, still his mildly casual self.

" Tact," he said, gently. " We've all done this before. Except you. They are just giving me the chance to put you in the picture, that's all. People are easy to read, Ward. When you've always been in charge of men as long as I have, they become transparent. Drink ?" He kneed open a door in his desk, brought out a bottle and glasses. Ward was still two people. On the outside he accepted the offer, humbly, and watched the golden liquid splash into the glass. Inwardly, he was more confused than ever. ' Why am I here ?' that little voice cried, over and over, but alongside it was another cry, of wonder. Did Pearson mean anything more than mere rhetoric, when he claimed he could ' read ' people ? Was he trying to say, subtly, that he was an ' X '-person ? Ward wanted to believe

it, wanted desperately to find companionship in this nightmare, but was inherently cautious. Could an 'X'-person be as complacently at ease here as Pearson obviously was?

Those genetic sports, those once-in-a-million chance combinations of talents which put them completely outside normal human measurements, the Extraordinary People, had always been given extraordinary privileges. No strings, no pressures and no inducements. It was left to their own extraordinary intelligences to know when they were needed and what they could do. Unless they volunteered for such a position, no-one gave them orders. Unless they volunteered the information, no-one even knew of their special status. Such privileged secrecy was necessary if they were to live anything like normal lives.

Incautiously, Ward had allowed himself to be inducted into this expeditionary force. Curiosity had driven him and pride was keeping him from backing out. But Pearson was an old hand, had done all this before, many times. Could he be an 'X'? The Captain tasted his drink, sighed again.

"There's not a lot to tell you, Ward. You heard the essence of it, what I told the men. The only modification I could make is this—that Taxile isn't exactly the same as Plion. It's about ten per cent worse. Once they get used to this, those men will take Plion like a holiday-trip."

"Just what are they supposed to learn?"

"Well, for the broad picture, how to operate efficiently together and use various specialised weapons, techniques, strategy, that kind of thing—which they have done already—but in these conditions here. In extreme heat and humidity, on a treacherous surface and strictly by instrumentation. Fighting blind, you might say. That's something you can describe and think about—but you have to *do* it, to be able to do it. Like swimming, Ward. You can't learn it from the book. You have to get in there and splash . . ."

He was interrupted by the door-buzzer, and then a brisk stamping. In came a bleak-faced man, cap at a precise angle, stripes strapped to his bare arm, all shiny with sweat and condensation, but managing to give a crispness to his pace, for all the clumsy flippers.

"Perimeter secured, sir. All quarters assembled and ready. Request permission to carry on with second stage unloading

and settling in, by shifts and allocation of guard duties and rest-periods, sir !"

" Very good, Sarn't major. Carry on, please. General inspection in eight hours."

" Sir !" The sergeant-major saluted, wheeled and stamped out. Ward felt reluctant admiration for such vigour and energy in this heat.

" *That's* what I want," Pearson said, softly. " Discipline. Everything clicking into place. Efficiency. I want to feel that every man will know exactly what he has to do and do it. And you can't get that without discipline." He drained his glass at a gulp, motioned Ward to do the same.

" Rest period," he said. " Better make the most of it. We will keep your comps pretty busy, from now on. Goodnight, Lieutenant."

Ward found his way back to his own quarters and used a little of the precious rest-period to feed preliminary data into his computer-complex. That part of his job was routine and he did it swiftly, without thought. These machines would plot and chart the progress of every man, singly; every group as a unit every exercise, in terms of efficiency; the whole brigade as a unit and all the thousand and one implications and variations on the basic pattern. In a sense, he and his machines were like the conductor of a great orchestra, to preserve full harmony and unison. In a truer sense, however, his function was as impersonal as the machinery and more like the central control of an automated factory. Ward could think like a machine, when the need arose. But he was grossly aware that he was a man, a human being.

" They are all men," he told himself, unhappily, as he composed himself for sleep. " All of them, even Pearson. And he is not ' X '—definitely !"

Inspection was half an hour away. Ward forced down the remnants of an unattractive breakfast and cast a glance round the table. Pearson, East and Wiggins seemed almost at ease, despite the film of sweat that gleamed on their half-naked bodies. Protective clothing was out. Captain Pearson had just finished telling him why, harking back to an old war on Earth for his examples. New Guinea and the Europeans fighting the Japanese. Conditions something like these. The European troops burdened down with every imaginable kind of protective gear and specially tailored equipment, which,

nevertheless, broke down and failed in quick time. And they were expected to meet and fight men who went out into the wild with nothing more than a breech-clout, a pouch of rice and dried meat, a rifle and cartridges—men who were at home in those conditions.

" Lessons are for learning," Pearson had said, sententiously. " When we set these lads down on Plion, they'll be more at home there than the bloody colonists. That, too, is discipline, Ward."

There came coffee and another interruption. Not quite so crisp and official, but still military. This man was older and the plastic stripes on his arm lacked the super-crown.

" Permission to report, sir ?"

" Yes, Dowty. What is it ?"

" Unloading stores and equipment, sir. Not ten minutes ago. Come to count up and one of the group-coms is missing . . ."

" Start again, Dowty and in detail, please." Pearson's voice had not changed in the slightest, but the mess-room became still with intense interest.

" Had a detail of ten men, sir, to help unload and stack equipment. The last knockings. I was busy laying away some lube-guns. Awkward shape, they are, sir, and you have to get them just right, or they take up too much room. When I saw that all the rest of the stuff had been humped, I dismissed the fatigue-party, and went to count up, just by routine, sir. And there was one short. One ten-man group-com integrator, sir. Missing !"

" I see." Pearson sat back, frowning. Then, " Very well, Dowty. Return to your store-shed. Do not touch anything. I want to see this for myself. Sergeant-Major Forbes ?"

" Sir !" The bleak-faced man appeared like a conjuror's rabbit. Ward fell in with Wiggins as they slop-slid through the hot murk.

" There's always something," Wiggins mumbled, philosophically. " But this is a new one on me." Over to the right, lost in the thick haze, there came a heaving crash and thump and then another. " Gas gun," Wiggins grunted. " Just testing, I expect. Getting ready for inspection . . ."

The store-shed was bright by comparison. Ward narrowed his eyes, stared in amazement at the confusion. Plastic boxes

and bales stood, totteringly, on all sides and the centre space was split by a counter, protecting an assembly of skeleton shelves. Dowty picked his way with practiced ease around and through the piles of oddments littering the metal-plate floor and indicated a stretch of shelf.

" Put 'em all here, sir, ready for issue. Should be ten, one for each unit of this section, as per the manifest . . ."

Captain Pearson eyed the row of units, without expression. They were oddly complex things. Ward had to look twice to grasp the basic design and knew a moment of quick delight at the way ten objects, each the same size and shape, had been nested together to make a neat whole. Groping back into his memory, he knew what they were for. These things broke apart into ten exactly-tuned units, made by a highly complex process which ensured that they were precisely in rapport with each other. Each man of a ten-man unit wore one, after the style of a hearing-aid and was thus at all times in hearing and speaking contact with his fellows. Such communication was absolutely essential, in these conditions. Without his ' ear.' a man would be lost, helpless and useless. Without the group-unit, one ten-man section would be negatived. Something like this had obviously been going through Pearson's mind, too.

" Sir ! " Dowty replied, mechanically.

" You have the names of the ten men who were assisting you ? "

" Sir ! "

" All right. Sarn't-Major, I want those ten men outside my office in fifteen minutes. Inspection postponed half-an-hour."

" Sir !" the sergeant-major said woodenly, and stamped away.

" The things they try on," Pearson sighed. " This is a new one. Ditch a group-com and ensure that you won't be able to function. The bloody idiots. What do they think I am ? Do they fancy they are going to lay about camp all the two weeks, wasting time ? Can't replace that unit, can we, East ?"

" Afraid not, sir. We'll just have to rotate, the way we do when we have a defective."

" Yes . . ." Pearson nodded. " Unless we have a defective as well. We usually do have one dud unit."

" We might be able to recover the missing one, sir."

" That's unlikely, isn't it ? If one of those men was smart enough to think of this, he was also smart enough to know how to get rid of it for keeps. Not so difficult, you know. He would only have to drop it in the mud. No, I think we can write it off. That's not important. What I want is the man. And I'm going to get him. Come on, let's get back to my office. Carry on, Dowty."

" The old man doesn't like crafty beggars," Wiggins confided, in a murmur. " Doesn't like dodgers, either. Usually the same people. He's right, too." Ward doubted it, but kept his own counsel. This should show, he thought, whether the enigmatic Captain could really ' read ' people, or not. All around, masked by the everlasting haze, he was aware of many men moving about their businesses with single-minded concentration. You needed a complex of planning and computing machines to keep track of an operation like this, under these conditions. And you needed those group-units, desperately. Ward saw this as a possible bluff. One man had ditched a unit, confident that Captain Pearson would not dare to set a ' ten-man ' out into exercises without it. And Captain Pearson was just as confident that he would find and beat the man concerned.

" Discipline," Pearson said gently, as he paced up and down in front of the silent line of men. " Discipline is everything. I must have men I can trust, men I can count on. You must have N.C.O.'s you can trust and count on. We all need to be able to rely on the other fellow, at all times. That's what discipline means—what it's for. Now, one of you men took a group-com unit and hid it. I did not say steal, nor did I say lost. Just taken and hidden. A joke, or a dodge, or a trick. That's all, so far. The old Army game. Make it bloody awkward for the officers. Drag your feet a bit. I know the feeling. I've had it. I understand it. All right, but the joke is over and you've had your fun, for what it's worth. We are not playing games any longer." He paused, pursed his lips judicially, stood back a pace or two from the wooden-faced line.

" I'm a man of my word," he said. " In the presence of witnesses—your Welfare Officer, your sergeant-major—I offer you this. It is still a joke. The man who took and hid that unit has the chance to own up now. The punishment will be slight and postponed until after the emergency. If he speaks up now. Well ? "

In the thick silence, Ward eyed the ten men. Ten faces, all dull and uninspired. No sign of movement. Nothing.

" Very well," Pearson said, as quietly as ever. " Sergeant-Major, take these men to the guard-house and keep them there, minimum conditions, until further orders."

As silence succeeded slapping feet, Pearson swung on Ward with a shrewd half-smile. " Out with it, Lieutenant," he offered. " What's bothering you ?"

" Aren't you shooting in the dark, sir ? I mean, you don't *know* that you have the man responsible, not for sure !"

" Sure as I need to be. Positive, in my own mind. Experience, Ward. I can spot them a mile away. Now all I need is to squeeze it out of the man. You any idea which one, eh ?"

" Not a clue, sir. I wouldn't like to make a snap judgment of that kind."

" You might not. But I *have* to. And I have to be right. That's why you are calling me 'sir' and not the other way round. Now, a job for you. Take the list and extract from those machines of yours a complete dossier on each of those men. Then, perhaps, you'll be able to spot the guilty one. In the meantime—ah, Sarn't-Major, all ready ? We will carry on with camp-inspection."

Back in his quarters, Ward watched the stat-sheets jerk out of the printer, inch by printed inch and read each one curiously. The information was meagre, being drawn from three months of service prior to being selected and shipped. Of the ten, one man had a few more ' crimes ' than the rest, but all were minor. Lost or damaged equipment; late for fall-in; improperly dressed; shave; haircut; all the usual trivia. Bennet, A. J. ' I'll bet,' Ward mused, ' that they call him Bad-Luck Bennet, or something like that. And I will also bet that this is the one Pearson picks on.' He shuffled the sheets, wincing at the distant crash of a gun of some kind.

On curious afterthought, he riffled through the sheets again and his eyebrows climbed. A coincidence ? It had to be, but it was devilish, just the same, and almost as gross a miscarriage of justice as the trick Pearson was trying to pull. He re-ordered the sheets, tucked them in a plastic-folder and went out, heading for the Captain's office. Pearson was just tipping his bottle.

" Ah, data !" he said, unabashed. " The stuff we fight with. Let me see them, Ward. Picked him out, have you ?"

" Something more important than that, sir," Ward delivered the papers across the desk. " Every one of those ten men is a specialist ! By some fantastic coincidence, they were all caught by the selection board and grouped as unskilled new-entries. See ?" Pearson scanned the sheets rapidly and smiled.

" You're wrong, you know. Just a slip, of course, but quite wrong. These men had just finished preliminary training, had qualified for specialist training, yes. But they hadn't begun ! They were ' awaiting posting.' And they got caught. It's the luck of the draw, Ward."

" But a damned injustice, just the same . . ."

" Nothing to do with us. We are not interested in that side of it. They are here for special combat training. That's our job. What I'm interested in is character, not abilities. I want the rogue—and I've got him, right here. You carry on, Ward. Ask Sarn't-Major Forsyth to step in here, would you ? I want to see this chap, Bennet."

Back in his quarters again, Ward stared unseeingly at his machines. The twittering lights and clicks never registered at all. His mind was full of a raw mixture of impressions, none of which tasted nice. This whole damned business was machine-like in its speed and lack of soul. Discipline—that was just a formula to lean on, to get everybody in step, like it or not. The machine had spewed out Bennet and Bennet was about to be squashed, one way or another, to fit the machine. ' It could have been me,' Ward thought, with a touch of panic. ' I have no real business here, either. I'm not a machine. Pearson is all wrong, but what the devil can I do about it ? He warned me there was nothing I could do and he was so right. But I must do something. I must !'

The meal-break gong stirred Ward from his machines, which could and did cluck and chuckle along without him quite well. He left them to take in and deal efficiently with a steady stream of data, while he slithered the few yards to the mess-hall. For all the heat, he could feel the ' chill ' atmosphere generated by Pearson and had the native good-sense not to ask direct questions. By inference, he gathered that Bennet had been put to the question and had stubbornly refused to confess. To himself, Ward deleted the terms ' stubborn ' and

'confess,' and felt his desperation increase. He had to see those ten men in the guard-house and talk to them, if only to get this monstrous sense of injustice out of his mind.

The meal over, Wiggins and East made mumbled excuses and left. Ward knew he should have done the same, but he lingered, caught the Captain's eye.

"I'd like to talk to the prisoners, sir," he said, and Pearson scowled. It was a surprising transformation of his habitually mild expression.

"You're not going to interfere, Ward. Those men are damned uncomfortable, now, in mind and body. I want that. I want them to get so sick of it that they will bring their own pressure to bear on Bennet, and *make* him confess. I can't have you interfering and spoiling it."

"As Welfare Officer, I have the right to direct access to prisoners . . ."

"Right?" Pearson's voice sharpened, just a shade. "While I am commanding, Ward, you have no rights other than those I permit. And I do not permit this. I will not have you comforting those men!"

All at once, Ward thought he had a lever. Small print out of the Space Regs came to mind. He braced himself.

"Are you making that a positive instruction, sir, that I am not to see the prisoners?" and Pearson seemed to freeze quite still for a moment. Then he smiled and put on his mild manner swiftly, like a cloak.

"Very well, Lieutenant. I don't like the tone, or the inference. I won't forget it. All right, you may see the prisoners. But you may not issue any order to modify—oh hell! Yes, what is it?"

Sergeant-Major Forsyth flip-flopped into the room, bleak-faced as ever.

"Begging your pardon, sir. Conducting a routine exercise. Inspection of camp for infiltration and possible spies, planting of booby-traps, etcetera, as per manual. Discovered this, sir!" and he held out an object that made Ward's eyes open wide.

"The missing unit, by God!" Pearson came to his feet. "Where did you get it, Forsyth?"

"Corner of the roof, main mess-shack, sir. Any one of a hundred men could have put it there—anytime!"

Pearson smiled suddenly and there was something shivery about that teeth-showing. Ward, with an empathy that came to him in rare moments of stress, knew just what the Captain was thinking. Chess-moves. Gambits. How to evaluate this and play the next one.

" Lost his nerve, eh ?" Pearson murmured. " That's a good sign. He'll break more easily than I thought. Very good, Sarn't-Major. Thank you. That was good thinking. A long shot that came off. See the unit is secured safely and inform Lieutenant East that we now have a spare." When the sergeant-major had gone, the Captain turned to Ward, still smiling.

" Go and see your prisoners, Lieutenant, by all means. I'd advise you to tell them that there's not much sense in holding out, now."

" Isn't there a flaw in your reasoning, sir ?"

" I don't see it."

" You said the man who was smart enough to think of this would also be smart enough to get rid of it for keeps."

" Ah, yes," Pearson sighed. " But I was overestimating the intelligence of the man. I've talked to him since. He lost his nerve, Ward. Tell him that, will you ? Tell him there's no place, in an operation like this, for a man who fumbles in any way."

Ward slithered his hot and uncomfortable way through the haze and stink to the guard-house and his internal impressions were almost as confused as the outer ones. This whole thing felt wrong. Judgment and condemnation by assumption was wrong, to begin with. Then, any man who had thought as far as to steal an essential piece of equipment, would have thought just that little step more and got rid of it for good. All he had to do was drop it, step on it and go on. But he had secreted it where it would be safe and where it had to be found, sooner or later. That didn't make sense. Not from any man with enough intelligence to qualify for specialist training.

The guard-room had not been floored and the men inside had, perforce, to keep moving in a chain-gang style shuffle, or risk slow sinking into the ooze. There were no furnishings of any kind and no air-conditioning. This was, then, minimum conditions. Ward felt his stomach tighten at the thought of undergoing this, hour after hour, and his imagination made it feel even hotter in here than it was outside. He felt hopelessly

inadequate. What could he do, here? The ten faces, the slouched, shuffling figures, were all equally anonymous, remote. He sensed resentment, so strong that he could almost taste it.

"Which is Bennet?" he asked, desperately, and got a grudging sign. This was a tall, gangling man, sad faced and slightly stooped. The sort to break a drill-sergeant's heart. Ward moved to fall into a shuffling tread beside him.

"The unit has been found," he said, quietly. Bennet made no comment at all. "Don't you want to hear about it?"

"What for? None of us took it. We don't know anything about it. Sooner they find out who did take it, the quicker we'll be out of here."

"Captain Pearson is still certain it was you, or one of you. Now that he has the unit back, he's expecting a confession. The trick didn't work, so there isn't any point in holding out, whichever one of you it was."

"Would you confess, sir, to something you didn't do?" Bennet's voice was a dull mumble, but the question was unanswerable. Ward sagged. One of the other trudging figures drew close enough to ask,

"You any idea, sir, what would happen—to the man who owned up, I mean?"

"I think so . . ." Ward groped into his memory, swiftly. "This is not the front-line. If we were on active combat-duty, it could be summary execution, a firing-squad. But here, depending on Captain Pearson, the most he could do would be to remit the man to parent-ship and then back to base for courtmartial trial. Of course, it would be the end of his career in the Service, at the very least, and a dreadful character-mark. But it would be the honourable thing to do, wouldn't it?"

"But we didn't do it," the second man growled, angrily. "We didn't do it, none of us. How can we own up?"

It was the moment of truth for Ward. This was what he had been dreading, this moment of rapport. The one faculty he had in excelcis was the ability to be 'in tune' with others, to feel as they felt. But it hurt, it hurt almost as badly as being physically torn apart. The foreknowledge of pain held him back, but the insistent need to know the truth drove him on. Steeling himself, he reached out to these shuffling, despondent men and writhed, inwardly, as their combined personalities

drenched him. Sweat spouting from every pore, he fought to collect his faculties again, buckling at the knees with the strain. Blindly, he turned and made a trembling sign to the guard, and staggered out into the noisy gloom and haze. All that—for what?

Trudging back to the mess-room, he rebuilt his composure, got himself into one controlled piece, restored a measure of confidence. But the prospect was one thin edge away from despair. All those men were innocent. That much he knew for certain and at great cost to himself. But Captain Pearson knew otherwise and his kind of 'knowing' was just as positive as non-rational, and as impossible to argue with. How to convince him? An imaginary dialogue ran through Ward's mind.

"Captain Pearson, sir. I have to tell you that I am an 'X'-Person. I have a paranormal faculty. I can read people. You are quite wrong. Those men are all innocent . . ." Ward groaned aloud at the utter impossibility of it, at the tremendous repercussions there would be. Pearson would be furious, would lose 'face,' and there would be enquiries, checking up, rumours, dislocations, the whole of the operation would be fouled up. There had to be some other way. But what?

The mess-room was empty. Ward stared around, temporarily baffled, unable to think straight. Then, getting a grip on himself, he set out again into the haze, with muffled noises and activity all around, to find Pearson's office. On the way, a glowing arrow caught his eye and he turned aside to visit his own quarters, just long enough to look around and assure himself that his machines were happy. Digesting the incoming reports, analysing them, coding them, printing them out for the mass-record, all with quiet efficiency. Ward stood a moment. Again the inner cry came to him.

'What the hell am I doing here? I'm not needed. A machine could do this better than me!'

Then he spun and went slip-slopping off to Pearson, growing calmer with each step, losing his personal distress in the process of shifting the problem out of the emotional into the calculation level. Lieutenant East was just leaving as he reached the door.

"Stroke of luck, finding that unit again," he grinned, hurriedly. "We had a defective—always have at least one, but all the time those ten men are in the guard-house we do have a spare . . ."

There goes one happy man, Ward thought, as he went in to find Pearson at his desk, studying a chart. He looked up, shook sweat from his nose-end and gave Ward a careful smile.

" Progress satisfactory, so far. I'll want your digests, soon. Well, now," he let the chart roll itself up into a tube, " you've carried out your errand of mercy. Feel better ?"

" You're still absolutely convinced one of those men is guilty ?"

" Oh come, Ward. Not that old tack, still. When you've handled as many men as I have, you get to know how they work. This is simple and straightforward. It is obvious. That's the beauty of discipline. Teaches you to appreciate the simple and obvious. It's direct, effective—and it works."

" Discipline," Ward said, carefully, " is one of those portmanteau words that I dislike. Anyone can learn discipline. It doesn't call for any great deal of intelligence. Millions have learned it who would never have had the wit to invent a half of it. And many more millions have lived and died without ever knowing about it. But using it intelligently, that's a different matter entirely, isn't it ?" Pearson seemed to stiffen, for a moment and then to dissolve into his habitual ease once more.

" Yes . . ." he said, almost to himself. " The necessity for rules—people like you tend to balk at that, Ward. You cry out about fetters and bars and claim you are being restrained. Your precious individuality is being threatened. You look surprised ? You didn't think a man like me would have time for philosophy, did you, eh ? Man, I keep telling you. When you've had the handling of thousands of men, you get to know the way they think, to sort them into types. I've met your kind—who think they can think, who resent any imposition of discipline. You don't realise that if you had never learned, say, the very rigid rules of speech, syntax, grammar, you wouldn't be able to stand there and argue with me, right now. If you hadn't learned your ABC's you wouldn't be able to look up a reference in your files, would you ?"

" That's all true," Ward shifted ground, hurriedly. " But that is to make use of rules. They serve our purposes. Your kind of discipline is the other way round. *You* are serving *it* !"

" Ah ! Now we are out in the open." Pearson leaned back in his chair and shook his head sadly. " Your trouble, Ward, is that you're an intellectual. You are out of touch with reality. An ivory-tower man. This is real, Ward. This is

life. We are here to do a job. That comes first, above everything else. To do that job, I must have men I can trust . . ."

"But, can't you see it? You are forcing a man, one of those men, to tell a lie—just to save your intuition, to make your guesses come right!"

"Rubbish!" Pearson snorted, indulgently. "I am teaching those men, and everyone else in the Brigade a very useful lesson; that what I say goes; that I know them better than they know themselves; that they can't play tricks with the Service and get away with it. I'll have a confession out of Bennet soon and that will dispose of him, get him out of the way. Then we can get on with the job in proper style."

"What if you *don't* get a confession?"

"You can't bait me with temptations and intellectual gambits, Ward. I haven't the time to go exploring the fascinating but quite improbable and useless byways of speculation. I don't speculate. I *know*. I'll have that confession, and that will be the end of it."

"And then?" Ward made himself be calm and curious. "What then? The guilty man will be remitted for court-martial, and you'll have an unbalanced unit, somewhere, won't you?"

"Of course not. One of the N.C.O.'s will make up the ten. All routine, you see? All worked out beforehand. We lose men in action, you know, but we don't stop to speculate on the justice of it. We regroup and go on. Discipline, Ward. It's the one certain answer, every time."

By the time he had returned to his quarters, Ward was inwardly as cool as a surgeon preparing for a major operation. He was fully into the abstract stage now. This was a problem, all laid out and clear-cut. He needed to be able to juggle the relevant factors impartially, to take personalities out of it. One of the chief drives, here, was also one of the oldest hates in the history of Man—the universal hostility of the common man towards the intellectual. Socrates died because of it. The skinny schoolboy bookworm suffers the gibes and the ganging-up of the beefy types because of it. Intellect is hated because it is envied, is dimly seen as some kind of superiority. But intellect survives—it must survive. It is the one thing that Man has been able to hand down to his descendants.

He was wrenched from his pondering by the buzz of his door-signal. Frowning, he thumbed the 'come-in,' and his frown deepened at sight of his caller.

" Dowty ? What can I do for you ?"

The stores-sergeant was in obvious distress and showing all his age in his sweaty face.

" Wanted to ask your advice, sir. About that missing unit—what's been found, now . . ."

" Yes . . .?"

" Well, sir . . ." and Ward knew, with a sudden flash, what was coming. " That was my fault, sir. You saw the state my shack was in. Everything all in a heap, like it always is, in the first scramble. Well, that blasted unit was there, all the time, under a pile of plastic floor-plates. Must have been dropped or something. I found it when I came to tidy up."

" But why the blazes didn't you report it at once ?"

" You don't know the Captain the way we do, sir. If he says a thing has been stolen, then that's it. He doesn't like arguments. Everything has got to be all cut and dried, always. So, when I found it, I didn't know what to do. And the longer I waited, the worse it got, you see, sir. It's a silly mistake that anybody could make, but, by this time, I could get discharged out of the service for it."

" So you hid it where it would certainly be found ?"

" That's right, sir. I thought once it was found, you see, it would take off the strain. And this is an urgent operation, you see. So I thought the Captain would postpone the whole thing, get on with the training-run and sort it all out afterwards. And by that time it wouldn't matter so much, one way ot the other. But now, well, he's still got those men in the guard-house. Seems to have got his back up, proper. And I don't know what to do and that's straight, I don't."

" Yes," Ward mused, unhappily, " the obvious thing is for you to see the Captain and face it out. But I hate to think what he'll do. He's set on this confession, you know. And that, I'm afraid, is largely my fault. I've driven him a bit, on it. If only there was some way of cooling him down, first. Making him see reason. The mood he's in, right now, he'll put you through the hoop good and proper, Dowty."

" I know, sir. That's what's bothering me. It's a silly thing—it don't seem right that I should be hanged for it, if you see what I mean."

Ward's desk-screen flared, suddenly, with a scrawl of light-letters. " Lt. Ward to C.O. at once," it said, over and over again.

" Something's broken." Ward stood up, cancelled the screen. " I'd better go see what. It may give me a chance to intercede for you. And it might not. I wish I could be more hopeful. I'll do what I can, of course, but you'd better stand by to own up and take the blast."

" Sir !" Dowty said, mournfully, and Ward followed him out into the gloom, trying to juggle this new factor into the general picture. He was so engrossed in his cogitations that he missed, at first, the thunderous atmosphere around Pearson.

" You wanted me, sir ?"

" Yes—and no, Lieutenant. I should have known—you managed to fool me, Ward, and I don't like that. Don't like it at all. So I'm going to get rid of you. I am going to check-mate your move."

Then Ward, waking up to reality, quickly, realised that this was no longer the affable, mild, easy-going person he had grown to know. This was a cold-eyed executive, grim and implacable. The change was astonishing and baffling.

" I'm afraid I don't understand, sir."

" It won't do any good, Lieutenant. I still hold the master cards, so long as I am in command here. You have set out to confound me, in your amateurish way, and I am going to break you for it. Discipline, Ward. It always works. It always has the answer, ahead of time. That's what it's for."

" What the hell are you talking about ?"

" That tone won't help, either. You went to talk to those men. You told them what would happen, didn't you, to the one who confessed ?"

" That's right, I did. One of them asked me. He had a right to know."

" A right ? You're stuck on rights, aren't you ?" Pearson put his palm flat on the desk, very quietly. " You said the man who confesses would be sent back to H.Q. for court-martial and would be booted out of the Service, didn't you ?"

" That's true, I did. And it's true, so far as I know. Isn't it ? And may I ask, sir, how you know all this ?"

" You may ask, and I'll tell you. Those men are conscripts, Ward. The one thing they want—all of them—is to get out of the Service, somehow. Any way will do, so long as they can get back home to Mother. And you had to go and plant the idea right in their silly little minds !"

" You mean . . ." Ward caught his breath as the idea clicked home. " You have actually got a confession ?"

" Does it surprise you ? Isn't that exactly what you intended, Lieutenant Ward ? Isn't it ?"

" Of course not !" Ward stammered in his surprise. " I never intended—it can't be true, anyway. Those men are completely innocent. All of them . . ." He mumbled to a stop before Pearson's grim eye. He dared not go too far, or he might be called to account for his certainty—and this was no time to throw Dowty to the wolves. In that tense second his wits raced. Which was better, to let a spurious confession stand and lose an unwilling man, or break it, invite Pearson's undying hatred, and break Sergeant Dowty for a simple error ? Captain Pearson saved him the trouble.

" All innocent, are they, Ward ? All of them ? I wish I had your simple faith, Lieutenant, in your fellow-man. Only, this time, it has let you down. Those ten men have let you down, Ward. For that, in a way, I have to be grateful, because you have shown me what kind of men they are. They let you down and they might have let me down, too, in the pinches. So you have done *some* good."

" I'm afraid I don't follow you . . ."

" You told them, confess, and you'll get chucked out of the Service—and they all thought it was a good idea. All of them, Ward. I have, here, *ten* hand-written confessions, one from each man. Need I say more ? Sarn't-Major !"

The door slid open, smartly, and Forsyth appeared, inscrutable as ever.

" You will escort Lieutenant Ward back to his quarters and make arrangements to hold him under close arrest until the shuttle ship can pick him up. And those ten in the guard-house. I'm getting rid of the lot of you, Ward. The Service has no place for men like you."

" You're so right," Ward said, but not aloud. He felt strangely light-headed and relieved as he slithered back to his quarters under the cold eye of the sergeant-major. "Discipline," he said, still to himself. " Damned if the old man wasn't quite right after all. It does have all the answers !"

John Rackham

The immigrants were afraid of the alien environment of their new home—so they ran away, but it was such a friendly, happy place, that in the end their fears were groundless.

THE UNDER-PRIVILEGED

by BRIAN W. ALDISS

The announcement that trickled from a thousand speech glands was as gentle as if it bubbled through chocolate.

" The first party to disembark will be the immigrant intake from Istinogurzibeshilaha. Will the immigrant intake from Istinogurzibeshilaha please assemble at their deck exit for departure to the Dansson Immunisation Centre as soon as possible. Your luggage will be unloaded later. Your luggage will be unloaded later. Thank you for your attention."

The man with the slow pulse in his throat lay on his bunk and listened to the repetition of this speech without raising the lashless lids of his eyes. The luxurious voice brought him back from a region far beyond the grave, where shapeless things walked among blue shadows. When he had reoriented himself, he allowed his eyes to open.

His mate Corbish huddled on the floor by the door, trembling.

He sat up slowly, for the temperature in their cabin was still too low for activity. But she was less torpid than he, and came over to him to put an arm round his shoulders before he was properly sitting up. She rested the edge of her mouth against his.

" I'm afraid, Safton," she said.

The words raised no rational response from him, though they conjured up a memory of the proddings of fright he had experienced walking through the tall wooden forests of his native planet.

" We've arrived, Safton. This is Dansson at last, and they want us to disembark. Now I'm terribly afraid. I've been afraid ever since I came out of light-freeze. They promised us a proper revival temperature, but the temperature in here is only ten degrees. They know we are no good when it isn't warm enough."

Safton Serton's mind was unstirred by her alarm, like a dark and magical pool that throws no reflection. He huddled on the bunk, not moving except to blink his eyes.

" Suppose Dansson isn't the haven we were led to think it is," she said. " It couldn't be a trick of some sort, could it ? I mean, suppose all those tests and examinations we passed on Istinogurzibeshilaha were just a bait to get us here . . . Oh, we hear that Dansson is so marvellous, but did we ever hear of one person who ever *returned* from Dansson ? If they had some awful fate in store for us, we—why, we'd be completely helpless."

She listened to the tramp of strange feet in the corridor beyond their door. She too had had her frightening dreams on the long interstellar journey here.

Her mother's tale had echoed back distortedly to her inner eye. She had seen that time when her mother was a little girl, forty years ago, and the humans who roamed the galaxy at will had first arrived and found her people in their wooden villages, dotted about those few zones of Istinogurzibeshilaha that would support life. In her dreams the visitors had been taller than the sad sequoias, and had brought not benefits and wonders but gigantic metal cages and coffins. She had woken with the clang of steel doors about her ears.

" We shouldn't have come, Safton," she said. " I'm afraid. Let's not stay on Dansson."

The pulse came and went in his throat and he said, " Dansson is one of the capital planets of the universe."

It was the first fact that drifted into his chilled mind. His system was functioning too slowly to respond to her, and by the same token he suspected that her mind was not working properly, and simply responding to subconscious fears.

Years of study at one of his home planet's new schools, established by men from Dansson, had led to his and Corbish's passing the series of examinations which alone could get you a passage to the admired cynosure of Dansson, chief planet in Sector Diamond, chief sector of the galaxy. He remembered the ranks of unfamiliar machines, the sick excitement, the flashing lights, in the Danssonian embassy as the tests progressed, and the pleasure and surprise of learning that he had passed with honours. Now Corbish and he would be able to get work in Dansson, and compete on more or less equal terms with the other families of humanity that congregated on Dansson. The challenge in the situation awed him. But he was not afraid—much.

The announcer spoke to them again, more pressingly.

Corbish was climbing into the clothes cupboard as the mellow voice began once more to urge them to the hatch.

" They're coming after us," she said. " They're coming to collect us. We must have been mad to let ourselves in for this."

He had no emotion, but it was clear he would have to go to her. He pulled himself out of bed and climbed into the single garment of polyfur with which he had been issued at the start of the journey. Then he went over and attempted to reason with her. He was still drowsy, and closed his eyes as he spoke.

" It's no good," she said. " I *know* we've been trapped and tricked, Safton. We shouldn't have trusted the Warms. They're bigger than us."

The beautiful yellow pupils of her eyes had contracted to slits in fear. As he looked at her, loving her, suddenly for her sake the fear got him too. He was overcome by the distrust the Istinogurzibeshilahans had for the races of humanity they called Warms. It was the distrust the underprivileged feel for those who have the advantages ; because it was instinctive, it went deep. Corbish might well be right. He climbed into the cupboard with her.

She clutched him in the dark, whispering into his aural holes. " We can wait till the ship is empty, then we can escape."

" Where to ? Istinogurzibeshilaha is hundreds of thousands of light years from here."

" We were told of a special quarter where our kind live—Little Istino, wasn't it ? If such a place exists, we can get there and find help."

" You are mad, Corbish. Let's get out of here. What has given you these ideas ? For years we longed to get here."

" While we were under light-freeze, I dreamed there were Warms here in our cabin. They moved us about and examined us while we were helpless, carrying out experiments on us, sampling my blood. There's a tiny plaster on my wrist that was not there before. Feel !"

He ran his fingers over the soft and tiny scales over her arm. The feel of the plaster, a symbol of medical care, only reassured him.

" You had a bad dream, that's all. We're still alive, aren't we ? Let's get out of here and stop being prehistoric."

As he spoke, he heard someone enter their cabin. They froze into immobility, listening. Someone came into the centre of the room, stood there muttering under his breath (perhaps checking a pair of names off on a list ?), and went out again.

They lay there, huddled together for a long while, listening to the gentle flow of announcements over the speech-glands. At last, like a stream drying up, they faded into silence, and the great starship was empty.

Safton and Corbish moved slowly through the streets, partly compelled by caution, partly because they had still not entirely overcome the effects of enforced hibernation.

It had been easy to dodge the few cleaners working in the corridors of the ship, and only slightly harder to escape from the immense complex of the space port. Now, in the city itself, they were entirely at a loss.

At first, they did not recognise that it was a city. Its buildings were not only widely spaced ; by the rough-hewn standards of Istinogurzibeshilahan architecture, they were scarcely recognisable as buildings. For here material had gone to create units that represented the essential non-solidity of matter. Their shapes held enormous gaiety and ingenuity ; occasionally fantasy had been followed to the point of folly, but to the wondering eyes of Safton and Corbish all was beautiful.

Between the buildings were floral layouts, terraced several storeys high. Some of these were alight with flowers, others dark with mighty trees much like the trees that grew in the fertile places of Istinogurzibeshilaha. The forbidding as well as the pretty was prominent, so that nature was not too sentimentally represented. There were also terraces on which wild animals prowled, and immense aviaries where the birds that

flew would scarcely acknowledge their captivity. The total effects was as much like a vast zoo as a city.

Safton and Corbish walked along a pedestrian way, anxious yet entranced. On sunken roads, formidably fast traffic slid through the city ; overhead, planes passed like missiles. On their own level, there were plenty of people walking at leisurely paces, but they were too nervous to stop anyone and ask their way.

" If we had some money, we could get a car to Little Istino," Corbish said. They had been issued with Danssonian credit books on the ship, with the state of their finances entered into it. But by missing disembarkation, they had missed collecting currency.

" If we come to a cafe, we'll hang about and try to pick up a little information," Safton said. Unfortunately, they saw nothing resembling shops or cafes—or factories for that matter, for all of the strange buildings seemed purely residential.

After some minutes of walking, they came mutually to a halt. Avenues stretched interminably in all directions ; they could go on walking for ever. Safton clutched Corbish's hand, motioning her to silence. He was watching a Warm nearby.

To judge from his appearance, the Warm was a velure, mutated human stock from Vermilion Sector, with a rich coat of fur covering him ; presumably in deference to local mores, he wore a light garment over his body. He had stopped at one of the shapely pillars that Safton and Corbish had been passing ever since they left the space field. The pillars bulged a couple of feet from the ground, tapering again higher up and ending in a spike some nine feet above ground.

The velure slid open a panel in the bulge of the pillar, inserted something from his pocket, and dialled. He waited.

Well below the level of the fast planes, a series of massive objects sailed overhead. The effect was as if a covey of grand pianos had taken solemn wing. One of these objects moved off its course now, sank a couple of feet, and settled on top of the pillar so that the spike of the pillar plugged into a hole on its underside.

Lights flicked on the piano, and the velure dialled again.

Faint humming sounds came from the piano. A scoop descended from it down to pavement level, and a red light on the scoop flicked on and off. It died and a green light came on;

the scoop opened. From it, the velure took something resembling a lacrosse racket.

By the time the scoop had retracted into the piano and it had removed itself from the pillar and resumed its aerial circuit, the velure was walking away, racket in hand.

It was at this point that Safton realised that the watchers were being watched. A man stood close by, surveying them quizzically.

" I guess you two are from out-system," he said, when they turned to look at him.

" What makes you think that ?" Safton asked.

The man laughed, a gentle and inoffensive laugh. " I've seen people from out-system amazed at our microfab circuit before now."

He came over to them. " Can I show you round or direct you anywhere ? My time's my own this morning."

Safton and Corbish looked at each other.

The man put his hand out. " Name's Slen Kater. Welcome to Dansson."

They hesitated until the hand was lowered.

" We are happy on our own, thank you," Corbish said.

Kater shrugged. He was a small sturdy man with a wild mop of yellow hair, through which he now ran his rejected hand.

" The fact that I'm a Warm and you're a Cold makes no difference to me, lady," he said, " if that's what you're thinking."

Corbish twisted her neck in a little Istinogurzibeshilahan gesture of anger. Safton said, " Thank you, we should be glad of your help. You see, unfortunately after we disembarked my mate put her handbag down somewhere and we lost it. It contained all the money we possess."

At once Kater was all sympathy.

" You've walked some way from the field. No doubt you'd like a drink before we get on our way. Perhaps you'll give me the pleasure."

" We're very obliged to you," Safton said. He took Corbish's arm because she was still looking displeased.

" No bother. Of course, you can dial yourself a drink on the microfab circuit if you have a Danssonian credit book, only it isn't so comfortable drinking in the street. Look, I'll show you."

From his pocket he produced a credit book much like the ones Safton and Corbish had been issued with. He flipped open the panel in the pillar and inserted his book in a scanner. There was an illuminated directory at the back of the recess ; Kater flicked it to the drinks section, read out the number of a synthop and dialled it on a dial.

" That sends a general call to one of the fab units," Kater said, pointing upwards. " Here comes one. These units have anti-gravity devices to keep them airborne. They're the factories of Dansson. Each one is packed with complex machines no bigger than your body cells. As you may know, the speed of really small mechanical devices is terrifically high. This chap would knock me up my own private plane if I wanted, and assemble it right here on the spot, in under five minutes. It turns out thousands of components in a second."

The piano settled on the top of the pillar, and Kater dialled again.

" How do you pay for what you get ?" Corbish asked.

" There's a scale of charges. The charge is deducted against my credit rating in my bank. My credit number goes through even before I dial—off the front of my book. Ah, one synthop!"

The scoop came down from the piano, opened, and revealed a beaker full of an amber liquid. Kater picked it out, poured its contents onto the ground, and flung the glass into a trash chute in the base of the pillar.

" Let's go and get a sociable drink," he said.

They sat at a pleasant table drinking. Safton had chosen a warm chocolatey liquid that went far towards fully reviving him from the recent light-freeze, although he knew that it might later upset his digestion.

" You're looking better, the pair of you," Kater said.

Setting her drink down, Corbish asked, " Why do you think that man we saw got a racket from the—the microfab unit ?"

" Because he was going to play a racket game, I suppose," Kater said.

Safton felt his mate writhe. He knew intuitively that she thought she had asked a silly question and in so doing revealed the supposed inferiority of Colds. Perhaps they should never have joined up with this creature with the yellow hair ; but he seemed to notice nothing untoward, and said cheerfully, " Oh, you'll be happy on Dansson."

" How do you know I will be happy on Dansson ?" Corbish asked. " Perhaps I will be miserable here. Perhaps I will miss my home."

Kater cocked an eye at her and smiled. " You'll be happy here," he said. " It's unavoidable."

To soothe things over, Safton said, " My mate Corbish really means that naturally things seem very strange to us as yet. Even the layout of the city is different from anything we know at home. For instance, your habit of building such massive big blocks and setting them among parkland is new to us. Why, this building we're in is almost as big as a city."

" It is a city," Kater said. " Dansson is simply a nexus of cities, each inter-related with the others, but each with a function of its own. Since we managed to get all factory and distributive outlets mobile in the way you've seen, the old idea of a city has died ; as a result, the distribution of population areas in Dansson is governed by social function rather than the old crude proximity to amenities."

The block they had entered to get to the cafe was shaped like an immense wedge of cheese standing with its tapering end towards the clouds. They sat looking down on an inner courtyard ; gesturing out at it, Safton asked, " And what particular function has this building ?"

" Well, we call it a classifornium. It's a sort of a—well, a museum-cum-zoo. Its contents come from all over the galaxy. I can show you round at least part of it, if you have the time."

Safton saw from the corner of his eye that Corbish was signalling to him that they should escape from this Warm as soon as they had learnt from him where Little Istino was ; and this he realised was prudent. But something else happened to him. He was seized by intellectual greed. He wanted to look into part of the museum, whatever happened. He knew that overwhelming curiosity of old ; it had been responsible for the years in which he had sweated and toiled to prepare himself for the tests which, when passed, would bring him to Dansson, away from his dark green home planet. It was more than curiosity ; it was a lust for knowledge. It was this lust, rather than fear, which led him to dread death, for death would mean an end to knowing, an end to learning, an end to the piecing together of facts that must eventually lead to understanding—understanding, accepting, loving, the whole strange scheme of things.

" We've got the time," he said.

" Splendid !" Kater said.

As he went to pay for their drinks, Corbish said, " We must get away now. Why do we stay with this man ?"

Rationalising, Safton said, " We are as safe with Kater as anywhere. If we are being sought for, isn't a museum a good hiding place ? Time enough to get to Little Istino later."

Despairingly, she turned away. Her gaze caught a newscast that a patron of the cafe had left on the next table. She reached over and picked it up, hoping that perhaps it might contain a reference to the part of the city where their kind lived, perhaps even a hint that would show them how to get there.

She could read the headlines, with their news of a food surplus in the southern hemisphere, clearly enough. But the ordinary print . . . in the distant epoch when her ancestors had become nocturnal, many of their retinal cones had turned back into rods for better night vision ; as a result the focus of her eyes was too coarse to achieve definition. She threw the cast down in vexation.

When Kater returned to the table, they joined him, and followed him into the immense wedge of the classifornium.

With a sure sense of what would fascinate anyone from outsystem, Kater took them to the Inficarium, and they plunged straight away into a strange and wonderful world. As they stopped, to stare in awe at the vista of the main corridor of the Inficarium stretching into the distance, Kater grinned at them. " Infectious disease has been wiped out on Dansson, and on most of the major planets in the sector," he said. " We are apt to forget that throughout the greater part of man's history, disease was the common experience of everyday life. Nowadays, with infectious illness eliminated, many of the once common bacteria and virus that caused disease are threatened with extinction. A few eras ago the IDPA—that's the Infectious Diseases Preservation Association—was set up, and many interesting strains were saved from dying out and brought here. This Inficarium, in its present form, is fairly recent."

Fascinated, Safton and Corbish went from gallery to gallery, peering through optical instruments that allowed them to view the various exhibits. In the Virus Hall, they could study the groups of virus that had once infested plants, the rare ones that infested fish and frogs and amphibians, and all the prolific

varieties that once ranged almost at will throughout the phyla of animal life : here was the last surviving colony of swine fever, here were similar colonies of sheep pox, cowpox, horsepox, swine fever, cattle plague, dog distemper, and so on. Here was psittacosis.

" You see how beautiful, how individual they are, and how wonderfully developed to survive in their particular environments," Kater said. " They make you realise what a small part of life-sensation man is able to apprehend direct. It is a sad commentary on our times that they were permitted to get so near to extinction."

In the next gallery, flourishing on tissue culture, they found some of the diseases that had infested man. First came the general infectious diseases, such as yellow fever, dengue, smallpox, measles, and similar strains. They were followed by the viruses infecting a particular part of the body : the influenzas, the parainfluenzas, adenoviruses, the enteroviruses, such as the three poliomyelitis viruses, and the lymphogranuloma inguinable virus present in venereal diseases.

From there they passed to the infections damaging the nervous system, and from there to near-relations of the viruses, the Rickettsiae, and from there into the Bacteria House, and so eventually, dazed, into the Protozoa House. But this time, the coarse-focus eyes of Corbish and Safton were exhausted, and they had to cry halt.

Leaving Kater to wait for them by one of the exits, they went to rinse their faces and cool their pupils. This gave Corbish the chance to insist that they made for Little Istino straight away.

When they mentioned the region to Slen Kater, he said that it was not far to go, and would show them how to get there.

" First, before we leave here, you will have to have an inoculation."

" What for ?"

" It's a precaution the governors of the Inficarium have to take—just in case any of the diseases escaped, you know," Kater explained. " It won't take a minute."

Safton was still remote, his mind taken up with the tremendous range of alien life they had seen. When Corbish started to protest, he cut her off. It was to see things like the Inficarium that he had worked to get to Dansson, and his patience with her fears grew less by the hour.

She sensed this. After they had received their inoculation in a little bay next to the exit, she turned to the Warm.

" We did not expect such kindness as you have shown us on our first day on Dansson," she said. " My mate is less anxious than I about adjusting to this planet. I feel that we are despised as an inferior species of man."

Unperturbed, Kater said, " That feeling will die very soon."

There was a silence as they walked along outside.

Embarrased, Safton said, "Do not embarrass Mr. Kater, Corbish. Let him show us the way to Little Istino and then we must take up no more of his time."

" Oh, I don't embarrass him ; he would not mind what I said if he thought they were the words of an inferior breed. Would you like the history of us Colds who live on Istinogurzibeshilaha Mr. Kater ? You might find us as interesting as your rare diseases."

Kater laughed shortly at that. " We have come to the station where you can catch a car for Little Istino. Though I'm sure your history would have been very interesting."

As he turned to go, Safton said humbly, " Mr. Kater, you must forgive us—our manners are upset after the light-journey. We still have one favour to ask you."

" Please, Safton, let's ask someone else !" Corbish hissed, but as Kater turned towards them, Safton indicated the notice board by their side. " Our eyes cannot adjust to the fine print, and we cannot read our destination. Would you be kind enough actually to see us into the right car ?"

" Certainly."

" And there's another thing—could you lend us the price of the fare ? If we could have your credit number, we will repay you when we get established."

" By all means," Kater said.

" You may guess how unhappy we are at having to ask such degrading favours."

" Nobody stays unhappy on Dansson—don't worry !"

The business of obtaining a ticket from the barricade of coin machines and then of descending to the right level looked very formidable to the strangers. The station was large, and appeared to house a maze of alternative routes. Also, it was uncomfortably warm to them, and they could feel their body temperature rising. The pulses in their throats beat faster.

" This car will get you to Little Istino," Kater said, as a yellow polyhedron slid into the platform. " This is single-level service, so you will only have ten stops before you are there."

As they hesitated by the door, Safton grasped his hand. " You have been so hospitable, we cannot thank you enough. There is just one thing—where do we go when we get out at the other end ?"

" Safton, do you think we can't ask when we get there ?" Corbish said.

Smiling, Kater got into the car with them.

" It's not all that much out of my way," he said.

As the car gathered speed, Corbish said, " I really don't know why you tag along with us the way you do, Mr. Kater. Do you take us for interesting freaks, or something ?"

" We're all interesting freaks, if it comes to that. I just want to help you get to where you wish to go. Is that so strange ?"

" And so all the while you must be thinking of us as poor cold-blooded creatures ?"

" I'm afraid Corbish has rather a chip on her shoulder at present," Safton said. " The mere size of this city is so overwhelming . . ."

" Don't be silly, darling," Corbish said. " Didn't you feel inferior when you saw that in this place they have to strive to protect from extinction diseases that hundreds of people on Istinogurzibeshilaha die of every year ? And it is apparent we can't think so efficiently as this gentleman, or see so well, or read with the same ability—" She broke off and turned to Kater. " I'm sure you will excuse my behaviour and put it all down to my natural inferiority. Perhaps we have time for you to learn something of the history of man on Instinogurzibeshilaha, since you are so interested in us ?

" I'll give it you in a nutshell—we've lived through two million years of under-privilege.

" I don't remember how long there have been forms of space travel, but it's a long long time. And about two million years ago, a big trans-vacuum liner got into trouble and had to put down on Istinogurzibeshilaha. Its drive was burnt out or something. Do you know what the world was like that those men and women found ? It was a barren world, without all the amenities you take for granted on Dansson. Most of it consisted of bare and lifeless soil—there wern't enough earthworms and bacteria in the ground to render it fertile

enough for plants. Well, there were in some favoured parts, chiefly by rivers. There the vegetation ran to primitive plants and trees—spore and cone-bearing things like cycads and giant ferns and spruce and pine and the giant sequoias.

" Oh, don't think such a dark green world does not possess a certain sort of grandeur. It does. But—no grass, no flowers, none of the angiosperms with their little seed pods that are embryo plants and afford nourishment for almost any kind of herbivore you can think of. You see what I mean. Instinogurzibeshilaha was at the beginning of its Lower Triassic period of evolutionary growth.

" Why do I say ' was '? It still is ! In another thirty million years or so, we shall just about graduate into the Jurassic.

" Can you imagine what hell those first men and women went through? In those deserts and dark forests, where the branches bow low under crude wooden cone flowers, what is there for a warm-blooded man ? Nothing ! No animals he can kill ; the mammals have yet to arrive on our planet, because you don't get them until the higher-energy plant foods available in an age of flowers materialise.

" The early reptiles are about—stupid, inefficient, slow-moving, *cold-blooded* things, that can exist on what nourishment is going. And amphibians. Fish and crustaceans, of course. They provided food."

As she talked, her tone lost its earlier resentment. Her eyes rested on Kater's face as if it was merely an outcrop of that stern landscape she described. Safton sat looking out of the window, watching mile after mile of the galactic city flash by. Dusk was falling ; the fantastic towers seemed to float in space.

" Those people—our ancestors—had to live off the land when their own supplies ran out. They had a fight, I can tell you. They had their own grains, but the grain failed when sown. It just wasn't the right environment. We have spiders, but most insects—not ! No bees . . . they'll come after the flowers. Butterflies, no, and nothing like the high-speed metabolism of a true bird. So the people lived off the low-energy-level foods that were available.

" It was quite a change of diet. You know what happened ? They didn't die out. They adapted. Maybe it would have been better if they had died out and we have never been. Because to adapt meant that they slowly became cold-blooded. When life begins on a planet, it always starts cold-blooded ; in the circumstances, cold blood is a survival factor—did you know

that, Mr. Kater? That way, life is lived slowly and it can survive on the vitamin-poor diet to hand. Much later along the evolutionary path, you get chemical reactions in the blood-stream, heating it, which are caused by eating new foods—the richer foods that follow in the wake of the seed-bearing plants.

" Evolution played a trick on our ancesters. It sent them backward down the path. They became—we are—reptiles."

" That's nonsense, Corbish," Safton said. " We are still men, simply cold-blooded."

Corbish laughed.

" Oh yes, there are worse than us. Our unhappy ancesters went feral when their blood started running cold. For thousands of years, they were nocturnal in habit. One group of them about fifty strong left the rest and took to a semi-aquatic life in the region of the Assh-hassis Delta. You should see *their* descendants today, Mr. Kater! Why, they aren't even viviparous! However alien I am to you, at least I don't lay eggs!"

She burst into ragged laughter, and Safton put his arms round her.

After a silence, Kater said, " I expect you know the history of Dansson. We—man—slayed the seventy-seven nations of bipedal Danssonians before we took over the planet. I would think our history is more disgraceful than yours, if we are competing for disgracefulness."

Corbish turned and looked at him with interest.

" I hope you are feeling better now," he said to her. " We are just about to get out."

The car had stopped several times while she had been talking. Now it stopped again and they alighted into a station much like the one they had left. When they climbed above ground, it was to survey a part of the city much like the part they had left, except that here the great buildings were more conservative in shape and more riotous in colour. The microfab system floated over their heads, shuttling its pianos through the dusk.

Kater halted and pointed out a scarlet building down the avenue to their left.

" That's Little Istino. You will feel at home among people from your own planet—but don't forget we are all basically of the same kind," he said.

" I wish to apologise for being rude earlier," Corbish said. " I will make no excuses for myself, but I was feeling very unhappy. Now I feel much more content."

" Funnily enough, so do I," Safton said. " It must be your company, Mr. Kater."

Slen Kater shook his mop of hair. " No, it's not that." He laughed. " Perhaps I will walk along with you right to your door. You're finding it hard to get rid of me, aren't you ? You see there is a reason why you are feeling happier."

They walked by his side, looking curiously at him as he continued.

" I am an Immigration Officer. I was asked to follow you when you did not check in for your inoculations at the space field. No, no, don't look so alarmed. With every ship that comes in we run into the problem of people who for one reason or another don't want to come and see us. They often prove to be the brightest and most interesting people."

" After all this you are going to arrest us ?"

" Certainly not. I have no need to. You will be peaceable and content here."

" You sound very confident," Corbish said.

" With reason. Everyone who lives on or comes to Dansson is inoculated against unhappiness. Oh, yes, we have a serum. Happiness is purely a glandular state. There's no illness here, as you know. Give a man the right glandular balance, and he will be happy. You had your inoculation that you missed at the space field as we left the Inficarium."

" Wait a minute," Safton said, stopping abruptly. " You said that was a routine shot to ensure we had not picked up any diseases."

" My dear Safton—there was no possible danger of that. Those dangerous little life forms are all sealed away safely. No, it seemed a good time to make you feel happier. It has worked already, hasn't it ?"

" My god !" Safton raised his fists, looked at them and laughed. There was no force in them, no core to his anger, no dismay in his surprise. He seized Corbish's arm and hurried her along, excited at the feeling of pleasure that swept over him. They certainly knew how to live on Dansson.

" Do you have these injections too, Mr. Kater ?" Corbish asked.

" Certainly. Only being resident, I don't need as much as . . . as visitors. Only the very eminent are allowed to be creatively miserable. As you're new here, you've had a stiff dose to tide you over the next few months."

She tried to feel vexed at this. Somehow she thought there was something in his statement that should have roused her apprehensions. Instead, she could only see what a joke he had played on them. She giggled, and was still giggling when they reached the scarlet structure, towering high above them.

" This is Little Istino, and you'll be fine here. There are plenty of your own kind within," Kater said. " And none of those egg-laying Assh-hassis to worry you. They have a separate block elsewhere in the city."

" You mean you have them here too ? What use can they be to a wonderful modern planet like Dansson ?"

Immigration Officer Kater stuck his hands in his pockets and looked down genially at them ; they were nice little beings really.

" I admit the Assh-hassis aren't much *use*," he said. " But then neither are many of the thousands of lesser races of man we house here. You see, as true man spreads across this neck of the galaxy, he is slowly wiping out those half-brothers who are no match for him. So they have to be preserved—for study and so on. It's roughly like the diseases, I suppose."

Corbish and Safton looked at each other.

" I never thought of the Assh-hassis as a disease," Safton said. " They'll be amused when we get back to Istinogurzi-beshilaha and tell our folks."

" Oh, you'll never go back there," Kater said. " Nobody ever leaves Dansson."

" Why not ?"

He smiled. " You'll see. You'll be too happy to leave."

They were still laughing as they parted from him, the best of friends all round.

" That was a very comical remark he made," Corbish said, as they waved him farewell, " about parts of Dansson being reserved for inferior types of human—almost like a cage in a zoo, except I suppose the inhabitants don't notice the bars."

" Wouldn't the Assh-hassis be furious if they realised the truth ?" Safton chuckled.

Arm in arm, they turned and hurried into the big scarlet-painted cage.

Brian W. Aldiss

Once again the Special Survey Team of G.U.S., (Galactic Union Survey) are faced with an enigma —this time on a planet where matter as we know it does not conform to known specifications.

THE JAYWALKERS

by RUSS MARKHAM

Marvin Conte sat behind his massive onyxite desk rocking gently in his multipoise chair. Before him, the row of small tele-screens which kept him in touch with all of the many departments of Galactic Union Survey, displayed filmy grey surfaces like so many sightless, cataract-covered eyes. The Director was about to brief his top echelon Special Survey Team and wanted no interruptions unless they were really important enough to warrant his personal attention. The censor circuit had therefore been activated which would inform all incoming callers: 'The Director is in conference—all information and queries should be referred to Miss Grace Elliot at Director's Enquiries.'

Grace knew with an accuracy of better than 99% which matters would interest the dapper man whose vitality and sheer, all-encompassing judgment ensured that the right man or woman or the appropriate combination of both sexes was found for the problem under review. Conte's great talent was that of recognising and putting to use the talents of others; the inserting of four-sided pegs into suitably rectangular holes and the easing of round ones along circular apertures came as naturally to him as breathing did to others.

Some of the individuals who had started their careers with G.U.S. as members of survey or initial contact teams had later on displayed an adaptability beyond that first credited to them. Whether these latent abilities would have developed regardless of how the person concerned had been employed, or had been fostered by the variety of changing circumstances in which the teams found themselves, was a matter for conjecture. Suffice it to say that they invariably found themselves a partner from the complementary half of humanity, and became that much more varied still, in their combined abilities.

It was Conte who, three years before, had conceived the idea of grouping such pairs of personalities into the quartettes who comprised the Special Survey Teams. It was a tricky job to find four men and women whose jig-saw outlines would mesh and blend into a unified whole, but it had been possible in a bare handful of instances, and the effort had paid dividends. Problems which had stymied the more functionalised members of the survey and initial contact teams, had given up their secrets to the Specials. Such an enigma was about to be unfolded to the first Special Survey Team ever formed.

" What's the job for our next tour, Chief ?" began Ellis Hunter. " I hope you've got a change from deserts and jungles this time."

The Director smiled at the dark-haired, heavily-built man facing him. True to his name, Hunter was always keen, after a period of leave, to be hot on the scent of the current puzzle.

" I can promise you a real change this time," he said. " The world which you are going to seems to have everything you're used to *and* something more."

Four pairs of eyebrows lifted enquiringly at Conte's provocative opening sentence and eight ears were on the qui vive not to miss a single item of information.

" Ostensibly," the dapper man continued, noting with approval that he had their undivided attention, " Orontes II looks much the same from space as the Earth itself does—of course, the continents and oceans are different in shape—but overall, it looks like an oxygen-water world of the more amenable type."

Kim Laing could contain herself no longer, and her auburn hair glowed even brighter with an inner fire as she leaned forward slightly.

" You use the words ' ostensibly,' and ' looks like.' What can we take them to mean exactly ?"

Conte smiled again. " Patience my dear, all in good time. This isn't exactly a problem which can be defined in simple, explicit terms. I would hesitate before even attempting to put it into a precise format. But it *is* definitely intriguing and out of the ordinary—hence my use of the words you quote."

Kim seemed about to make another verbal sortie, but changed her mind at the last moment and surrendered to the Director's personal charm.

" Now down to details," said their chief, placing the tips of his fingers together to form multiple steeples. " The Orontes system is about the farthest point of our probes into space; about two hundred and ten light years away to be reasonably precise. It's a somewhat unusual conglomeration really. The sun itself is a considerably larger version of Sol and nothing very abnormal, but the rest of the system looks like the bits and pieces left over from a stellar do-it-yourself kit which has been messed about by someone who didn't know his job.

" Close-in, is Planet I, about the size of Mercury and possessing a surface temperature above the melting point of zinc."

" Over 400°C ?" queried Dave Laing, dredging up the information from the miscellany of facts in his mind.

Conte nodded. " A good 440°C, I understand. Naturally, under those conditions it has no atmosphere. Beyond Planet II is an asteroid belt about twice the breadth of ours, and outside this again, are a couple of gas giants which are *really* way out. It seems as if the evolution of the original proto-planets was disturbed by some unknowable upheaval at a critical point in their formation and distribution."

" You still haven't mentioned Planet II," pointed out Lola Hunter drily. " What's peculiar about it ?"

The Director inspected his fingernails.

" We received a description of it transmitted by the survey team via sub-space radio which sounds perfectly in order—nice fluffy clouds, a substantial atmosphere, blue oceans, green continents, snow-capped mountains," he spread his hands, " in a word, the lot."

" What about life ?" asked Ellis. "It sounds as if it ought to be eminently suitable."

" The team reports that as well—and of a good level too—with aircraft and other machines; if we can believe them."

" Then what's the problem ?" demanded Dave with a baffled air. " Surely this a is job for the initial contact boys and girls."

Kim returned to her original gambit of quoting Conte's words back at him. " You said about the survey team : ' If we can believe them,' so presumably you've got some doubts about the truth of what they say ?"

The man behind the big desk nodded approvingly.

" Quite right, my dear," he said.

" Just a minute," interrupted Lola. " I don't understand what's so unbelievable about an Earth-type description and intelligent inhabitants for Orontes II—we know of quite a few others which approximate such conditions, so why the air of mystery ?"

Conte's bland countenance remained serenely unruffled.

" ' The air of mystery ',' as you call it," he replied, adopting Kim's tactics of quoting a companion speaker, " is not going to be dispelled until *you* go to Orontes II and clear it up for *me*. I just can't believe the wild story which was sent to me by the survey team after they had made a planetfall. It seems as if they've gone space-happy—so I've arranged for them to be recalled as they've done all they can otherwise—it's obviously a job for you now."

All four of his listeners had reached a point of exasperation difficult to control, and the two girls only beat their men by a nose when they demanded to know just what it was which had sounded so incredible that the Director had suspected the first explorers of having gone psycho.

Conte waited for the hubbub to subside, then spread his hands, as if smoothing an invisible counterpane.

" I don't propose telling you *what* they reported," he said evenly. " I want you to go out there, see and hear everything for yourselves, and then form your own conclusions without being influenced by anybody else's ideas."

" Surely you can give us some clue as to what we might expect," protested Ellis, " even if you don't want to spill all the beans."

The Director shook his sleek head adamantly.

" I'm not going to give you even the ghost of a hint as to what you might encounter. I want a completely unbiased

story from you when you get back. Go out and see for yourselves."

To some extent the team were being hoisted with their own petard, and they knew it. It had become quite a routine with them to keep their boss fazed until the last possible moment when they returned from a mission, and now here he was turning the tables on them before they'd even departed.

" You're not deliberately doing this to pull our legs, are you ?" questioned Dave with sudden suspicion.

" Have I ever done that ?" parried Conte, although he *was* secretly amused by their discomfort.

" No," admitted the blond man, " but . . ."

" Come on lads and lassies," said Ellis, rising to his feet and realising that Conte had told them all he was going to, " we'd better get moving, that's one way to find out what gives on Orontes II."

" That *is* the general idea," approved the dapper man, " but do be careful, won't you ? There'll be other missions, so don't get too immersed in this job, and *don't* take any chances."

It was a slightly ruffled Special Survey Team which took the gravshaft to the roof of the huge building where a ferry craft was waiting to whisk them aloft to the G.U.S. satellite station 5000 miles away. They were still wrapped in the almost total silence of contemplation when they trans-shipped, via the satellite to one of the several deep-space cylinders poised around the big wheel like so many ungainly piglets around a metal mother. But try as they might, they could elicit no further information from Conte's cryptic comments, and had to contain their impatience for a little over a fortnight while their shielded vessel ran the gamut of the strange region where Time, Space and the Laws of Relativity were all flouted indiscriminately.

The journey through a small portion of the ocean of light-years was accomplished in the uneventful fashion that was strictly routine to G.U.S. personnel with the almost infallible hyper-light drive, and they spent their days of incarceration in a variety of ways inside the hurtling cylinder until, once more, they arrived at their scheduled destination.

When the vessel halted a scant fifty thousand miles from Orontes II, the visual and audio alarms flashed and shrilled

almost immediately. The directional mass detectors were reporting the presence of a substantial, fast-moving object.

" What's all the fuss about, Milt?" asked Ellis of the ship's pilot.

" We'll soon see," replied Fraser, seating himself before the control console, " these babies are really sensitive. Whatever is coming our way will be all of a thousand miles away right now." He flipped the switch which locked the visi-screen's external eye on to the directional system of the mass indicator and looked up at the big screen as the view of star-studded blackness which it presented steadied and sharpened. Only a multitude of diamond-bright points of light stared insolently back at him until the scene had been put through several stages of electronic amplification. Stars and distant, milky galaxies swelled and crawled off the edge of the screen as the picture expanded, and at last the object of the mass detector's hysteria swam into sharp focus.

Milton Fraser grunted. " It's either a satellite or an asteroid." He adjusted dials and a grid of fine lines appeared on the screen like a net being cast to trap the intruder.

A few readings sufficed to show that the five mile long, irregular rock sweeping towards them was, in fact, a rootless mountain orbiting Orontes II. Its albedo was quite high, and reflected sunlight winked and glittered from the harsh, jagged facets of its outline.

" Dave," said Ellis, " I think we should have a look at this baby before we go downstairs to the planet itself—what do you say ?"

" Seems like a good idea," agreed Laing. " Conte hasn't given us much to go on, so we may as well have a squint at the moonlet first and then take a gander at the planet from there."

" Shall we go then ?" offered the pilot.

" Whenever you're ready," responded Ellis, " pick your own spot."

Fraser nodded silently and flipped a few more switches keying the ship's propulsion and guidance system into the mass detector's control.

The ragged satellite drew rapidly nearer as the cylinder from Earth accelerated in a direction almost diametrically opposite to that of the space wanderer. When the vessel was a mere ten miles from its target, Fraser took over from the ship's automatic systems, and steered them in a flat curve over the raw

terrain until he spotted a plain surrounded by rearing stalagmites of rock.

" Okay there ?" he asked.

" Just the job," approved Hunter. " Lower away."

Like a cylindrical, metal bubble the survey ship floated above the flat area as Fraser killed all relative motion between them and the satellite. The artificial gravfield of the ship locked with the virtually non-existent one of the little moonlet, reinforcing the mutual attraction, so that the gap slowly closed and they descended with the gentle lethargy of a thistledown.

" All ashore that's going ashore—have your passports ready please," said the pilot jocularly, adjusting the gravcontrols so that the cylinder would maintain its position and equilibrium.

The Special Survey Team broke out their space-suits and helped each other into them, busily checking oxygen, radio, and temperature controls before they moved towards the air-lock and their first outside view of the Orontes system.

The foursome stepped eagerly out on to the barren surface of the orbiting mountain, flexing their limbs enthusiastically as if they had been confined for a fortnight in an all-embracing straight-jacket. Human reactions after a longish voyage were always the same, it felt *good* to be out in the open again, even if that was just being on a mote of solidified magma hurtling around a strange world which was itself the prisoner of a newly-visited sun.

Ellis hacked experimentally at the rock with a tool which closely resembled an old-fashioned ice-pick and gazed at the fragment which splintered away under his attack.

" Nothing very peculiar about that," he observed, and flung the specimen away from him. It moved rapidly away on a course parallel to the plain, a tiny, racing shadow marking its passage.

The others were looking up at the huge, looming spheroid that was Orontes II. Its appearance from only fifty thousand miles was much more impressive than was that of Earth when viewed from Luna. For a moment, he felt the unpleasant sensation that it was about to fall and crush them beneath its bulk, but then his interest in the surface details overcame the unreasonable fear, and he became as absorbed as his companions were.

Orontes II *was* Earthlike. Emerald continents sat serenely in the sapphire oceans around the equator, and island chains stretched away towards the sparkling gems of the polar-caps. As he gazed at the scattered cloud layers swimming through the filmy veil of atmosphere, Hunter spoke his thoughts aloud. " Where is the mystery which Conte spoke of—this looks like a paradise."

The practical voice of womanhood answered his query as his wife Lola snapped out of her personal reverie.

" I don't think we'll do much solving of the problem from here," she observed drily. " Let's take the shuttle and go and look for ourselves."

" Agreed," said Kim and Dave simultaneously, as they too, became their more business-like selves again.

Ellis spoke into his suit mike : " Hunter to Fraser—will you release the shuttle please ?"

The pilot's voice crackled in all their speakers. " Wilco, stand by please."

The group on the satellite's surface watched as the deep-space ship lifted slowly and rotated about its longitudinal axis so that the winged shape of the gravshuttle slung on the larger vessel's outside was correctly orientated in relation to the plain. Slowly the big cylinder descended, depositing the sleeker craft alongside the waiting party, then it lifted again and moved to one side before touching down finally in its new position.

Ten minutes later, when Milton Fraser had joined them from the big ship, they took off for Orontes II and moved rapidly towards the parent world in a direction that at first seemed ' up,' and then at some mystical turnover point became ' down.'

The party within the shuttle's thin protecting skin still wore their space-suits, reasoning that they should take nothing for granted in their investigation of the planet-sized mystery below. Warning prickles of what seemed like needle-footed caution crawled all over their bodies as the little vessel dropped through the area of clear atmosphere which Fraser had deliberately selected so that they could keep the ground below under direct observation.

" There's something queer about this place," said Kim with sudden conviction. " Listen !"

Her companions strained their ears intently, each of them aware of the minute itchings permeating their flesh, and each

of them thinking it was some nervous reaction peculiarly their own.

After several seconds of absolute silence Dave spoke, " I can't hear a thing."

" Neither can I," chorussed the others.

" Exactly," retorted Kim, forcing a grim smile to her lips. " We *ought* to be hearing something—have you all forgotten that we're dropping through a substantial atmosphere ? *We should hear the air whining and rushing over the shuttle's surface.* Although," she added irrelevantly, " I feel as if the air's moving right through this cabin by the crop of invisible, electrified goose-pimples which I've got."

The party stared at each other in strange surmise. They were so *used* to moving through atmospheres that the attendant noises just *did not* impinge upon their awareness, even when they were significantly absent.

" You're right about the silence," agreed Lola, " it *is* absolute, and I've got goose-pimples too, only you can see mine." She unclipped an airtight gauntlet and held out a tanned fore-arm as proof.

" I can go one better than the two of you," commented Ellis, " I feel as if I'm shot through and through with electrified wire-worms and it's getting worse. Better stop the ship Milt, while we think this over."

Deceleration thrust at their feet as the shuttle stopped its lift-like descent and came to rest. They were about two miles above the planet and immediately the strange physical sensations died away and became almost, but not quite, imperceptible.

Lola took off her other gauntlet and chaffed her arms vigorously. " That's better. It seems as if the effect is at least partly due to the speed at which we move."

" Could be," agreed Ellis. " Try going down slower, Milt."

The pilot was staring at his instruments. He pointed to one.

" There's something *damn* queer about this planet," he said vehemently. " The gravity repulsors should be drawing a good deal more power than that when we're so close to a body of this size."

" Maybe it's on the blink," suggested Dave. " Anyway, as long as we're not draining away our fuel at too fast a rate, does it matter ?"

" These things don't fail often," retorted Fraser, " let's try the standby panel and see." He energised the duplicate bank of instruments. The story which they told was the same.

" Perhaps we're right above a thermal, which is giving us some lift," suggested Laing, still sticking stubbornly to his theory that the matter was of no consequence.

" Nix," said the pilot shortly, and damped down the repulsor field a little.

The shuttle dipped hesitantly lower into the crystal-clear air, and immediately the tingling sensations returned to them all, but not so intensely as before.

" You were right, Lola," said Kim, " the heebie-jeebies *are* connected with our speed." She shivered slightly. " Throttle back a little more will you, Milt ?"

The pilot complied, and they drifted lower at the same unhurried rate at which they had touched down on the moonlet, but for a different reason.

Orontes II drew nearer and Dave Laing made the next shocking comment, this time on its appearance, which convinced even him that there *was* an abnormality about the planet.

" Look at the ground," he said huskily, " it looks as if it's partially transparent !"

The others crowded around the view-port. The area below the shuttle was of black earth liberally spattered with clumps of grassy looking growths and small plants and shrubs. Everything, including the foliage, had the translucent look of coloured glass. The green leaves and coloured flowers seemed to floating on an ebon, motionless sea. Roots spreading out underneath the plantlife were less distinct, but nevertheless quite recognisable. There was an air of artificial unreality about the entire scene, as if they were gazing at a vista frozen into an immense slab of crystal.

The last few feet separating the gravshuttle from the ground melted away and its five occupants waited for the slight shock which would denote that the cushioned legs had grounded. It never came. The vessel moved towards *and into the ground, its own fabric and the flesh of its occupants intermingling with the substance of the planet like two miscible fluids.*

Again the electric tingling suffused the lower limbs of the party and was painfully intense until the vessel stopped almost half-submerged in the strange matter. Their momentary agony

subsided and they gazed around at the bizarre scene presented by the interior of the forty foot cabin.

Waving gently, as if under the influence of an intangible breeze, were the green needles and splotches of lucent colour which were the plantlife of Orontes II!

With a dream-like disbelief the five humans stared wide-eyed at the planetary surface *which ran, apparently unmarred, throughout the cabin's length and breadth.* Then they became aware of their legs fading away indistinctly into the permeable soil all around them. While they could see for some distance downwards, the shuttle's walls were as opaque as ever. The transparency of the alien substances was evidently a property of the planet itself—it was not contagious.

Kim lurched forward awkwardly and would have fallen but for her husband's strong arm which he flung out for her to clutch. Not only had the planet's weird matter swept *through* her legs and lower body, but her sudden movement had brought back the electric shock sensation that she should have anticipated, but hadn't.

" Steady on, dear," he said, " if you get your head below that stuff, it might be dangerous. Move slowly towards me."

The slender little red-head hung on to his arm, and walked towards him as if trudging through a waist-high tide of molasses. He put a comforting arm around her shoulders and together they ploughed experimentally through a yard or two of the substance in which they were immersed.

Their three companions watched intently from the attitudes they had frozen into.

" It's not too bad if you move slowly and steadily," opined Dave finally.

" Maybe," replied Ellis, " but what the blazes is it ? I feel as if I'm one cloud of gas moving through another. *This stuff seems to be interpenetrating the very atoms of our body.*"

Lola waved her gauntletted hand in a trial fashion through a nearby plant. Her fingers and the leaves merged, and then were separate again, with no obvious disturbance to either, other than a slight, momentary blurring as if they had gone temporarily out of focus.

" It is," she said definitely. " In theory such a thing has always been possible, but I never thought I'd live to see the day when it could actually be done—no wonder Conte didn't believe what he heard from the team who came here first."

" D'you mean what I think you do ?" asked Ellis, turning to the girl who looked more like his sister than his wife.

The others' blank stares gradually changed to a dawning comprehension as she explained her previous statement in detail.

" All matter consists largely of empty space. The many, sub-atomic components of the whole complex structure have been variously considered as being anything from solid particles to immaterial energy shells—your guess is as good as mine as to the actual state of affairs—but one thing is certain; we have definite proof that under the right conditions, matter can become incredibly dense when the electrons are stripped away from the nucleus. You all know that this is the case with White Dwarfs and the unbelievably compacted Dark Stars, therefore with matter in the more normal state there must be plenty of space between the individual components or it wouldn't be any the less dense. Are you all with me so far ?"

Three heads nodded.

" Well," continued Lola, " with all this empty space available, why shouldn't one atom pass *through* the space tenanted by another ?"

" Because the electro-static and other forces present wouldn't permit it," said Dave flatly.

" Precisely," said the dark girl, a trifle archly, moving her hand through the plant again. " It can't be done can it ?"

The tall man's jaw dropped a little at the mutual contradiction of her words and actions. For the moment he was nonplussed.

Kim came to his rescue. " What Lola means is that we must have matter here which is in an absolutely different state . . . condition . . ." She groped unsuccessfully for the right word. " Anyway, on this planet it *is* possible."

Ellis came to life suddenly, after the fascination of the by-play which had just finished. " I wonder what the atmospheric analyser makes of the air outside ? Try it will you, Milt ?"

" Some of it's bound to be inside," reminded his wife. " Don't forget that gaseous osmosis must be taking place through our hull in one direction at least."

" True," answered Ellis reflectively, " but I imagine that it would be better to try a more concentrated sample."

The pilot switched on the little pump which produced a fairly hard vacuum in the tube leading to the outside, then

opened its external valve. Evidently the local air responded to the pressures produced by the lack of anything in the sampling tube, because they could hear the faint whistle of its passage to the analyser's interior. The machine clucked nervously like an old hen with an unfamiliar chick as it tried to examine its catch. Flashes, pulses, and ripples of light chased themselves haphazardly across a screen which should have displayed an intelligent percentage listing of the atmosphere's gases.

Milton Fraser watched their meaningless dance for five full minutes before switching the instrument off in disgust.

" A fine thing," he said, " we don't even know what sort of duck soup there is out there."

" Oh, well," Ellis said cheerfully, " we've got one consolation —presumably none of the local flora, fauna, or bacteria can affect us if we can't even touch each other."

" I hope you're right," grunted Fraser, " it look's as if we're going to have some visitors."

All eyes swung towards the ports lining the shuttle's sides. They were a foot or so above the strange surface which overlay the vessel's interior.

Screwing its way down through the air was a helicopter. Through its glassy-looking fuselage, the watchers from Earth could see quite clearly the outlines of the passengers. There were six in all of the chunky-looking humanoids who seemed to be the dominant life-form on Orontes II. The chopper alighted a hundred yards away and bounced slightly on its sprung, telescopic undercarriage. Two of the barn-door-chested natives got out and walked boldly across the glassy-looking greenward towards the partially sunken shuttle. The other four remained in the 'copter's open doorway watching the proceedings through binoculars.

Half-way to the Terran ship, one of the aliens halted, unslung what was obviously a movie camera, and calmly commenced taking pictures. His partner continued alone on the short trek, his general appearance becoming more uncanny as he drew closer. Despite the filmy covering of what looked like a uniform, they could see right into and through his body, as if they were endowed with X-ray vision. Two murky-looking hearts throbbed away behind the semi-transparent rib-cage. The Orontean stopped when he was a foot away from the shuttle, his two dark eyes roving interestedly over its surface. Evidently the vessel's external appearance was quite

new to him, if the gamut of unhidden expressions which followed each other across his round face were anything to go by. He raised one arm to about shoulder height and brought thick fingers forward to feel the outer metal skin.

Only Milton Fraser could see from his port what was going on, and he gave a running commentary to the others who were gazing in the general direction of the alien's position.

" He's almost in contact," said the pilot, " and I think he's going to get a shock in more senses than one when he does touch the ship."

Fraser's prediction was right. The alien's fingers swept into and through the shuttle's skin with the same careless abandon as Lola's hand had passed through the plant a few minutes before.

The pilot snickered as they all had a momentary glimpse of square-tipped fingers protruding through into the cabin before they were hastily withdrawn when their owner realised what was happening to him.

" He's looking at his fingers and rubbing them a bit," Fraser said, " I'll bet he wasn't expecting that." The pilot stared intently out through his port for a moment, while the others strained their ears to catch the syllables of a faint and incomprehensible babble from outside. " I think he's reporting back to the others what's happened. Wait for it—I think they've told him to try again."

A thick, translucent hand and arm suddenly appeared above their heads, as the heavy-set Orontean groped around inside from a position elevated about three or four feet above their own. It was soon joined by the other arm, until both were showing, to above the elbow.

They watched in fascinated silence as the two disembodied sets of fingers felt each other for mutual reassurance of their continued existence. The arms moved downwards, and quite suddenly, the alien's burly but insubstantial looking body appeared inside the cabin in a bent forward attitude which prevented his head and neck poking through the upper skin of the vessel. For a long minute he crouched, looking at the Terrans half-submerged in the Orontean soil, his deep chest rising and falling, it seemed, at an increasing rate. His mouth abruptly dropped open, and it was obvious that he was suddenly uncomfortable and gasping for breath. He wheeled in a surge of panic to retrace his footsteps and get out of the air which was asphyxiating him, forgetting that he could just as

easily have walked out through the other wall facing him. One broad foot ground down on a plant, crushing it, and he slipped, falling headlong on to the planet's surface suffusing the cabin's interior like a frozen sea. The alien's semi-transparent countenance was darkening ominously, and he tried desperately to get to his feet again. The effort failed, the powerful looking body was weakening visibly and could not lift itself erect.

Unthinkingly, Ellis waded towards the Orontean, biting his lip against the electric tingles shooting through his flesh and bones. He stretched out a gauntletted hand to assist the struggling alien—and only realised when it had passed right through the twitching body, that he couldn't touch or lift the imprudent stranger.

" Quick, Milt," rasped Hunter, " this chap'll suffocate if we don't do something—take the ship up !"

The pilot was only a yard away from his control console and didn't wait to get into his chair. He stabbed at the button which activated the gravfield and the shuttle jumped away from the surface in which it had been embedded. The occupants suffered a split-second agony which whipped through their lower bodies as strange forces tore at their component atoms—but the alien's body and the planetary substances diffused harmlessly through the hull and stayed behind. Below them, the alien sucked hungrily at the native air now fully available to his tortured lungs, and his movements grew stronger, much to the relief of the Special Survey Team members who hadn't relished the idea of the newcomer dying through an incautious moment of understandable inquisitiveness.

A posse of Oronteans leapt from the helicopter and joined the camera operator in reviving their fallen comrade. He was soon sitting up and gesturing at the silently hovering grav-shuttle. It seemed that his explanations of what had occurred were favourable, because in minutes, the party on the ground was waving for the Earth ship to come down again.

" O.K. Milt, we can go down now, they seem friendly enough," commented Hunter after a close scrutiny of the scene below. " I think we're going to have to do a little bit of initial contact work for a change—better get the projection set ready Dave," he added, as the shuttle descended slowly.

" And keep her a few inches above the ground, Milt, please," pleaded Kim, " I don't relish any more shock treatment from Orontes."

" No more do I," answered the pilot watching his instrument dials carefully. " I feel as if I've had enough physiotherapy to last me the rest of my life."

The vessel came to a halt slightly to one side of the position which it had formerly occupied ; only one medium-sized bush protruding into the cabin at its after end reminding the five occupants of the weird interior scene of a few minutes ago.

Six aliens walked trustingly towards the shuttle and waited expectantly outside its main entrance.

Milton Fraser opened the hermetically sealed doors which could double as airlocks when required, and lowered a set of steps with broad treads towards the ground. Their flat feet sank a little into the strange soil as expected, but were prevented from a full submersion when the pilot anchored them to a set of eyelets on the outer skin.

" All set for the film show," he said.

Dave Laing lowered the projection equipment on to the bottom step with its screen facing towards the aliens who had sat on the ground a few yards away. Obviously they were quite knowledgable about what was coming next. Their muted comments filtered through the suit mikes in a peculiarly subdued fashion.

Both groups were utterly convinced of the other's integrity and good nature, partly from an inexplicable feeling that no harm was intended on either side, and partly from the reassuring knowledge that there wasn't much they could do about it even if they had felt otherwise. The meeting was going to be a 'first contact' with an emphasis on the impingement being mental only.

Dave actuated the projector's controls and the prepared, standard cartoon film began on the screen. It showed a cleverly put together sequence illustrating the Earth's position in the solar system, the taking off of a shuttle from the G.U.S., satellite station, and tracked the course of the interstellar ship to the Orontes system, with the trans-shipping and landing of the shuttle on the second planet.

The watching Oronteans nodded in a satisfied fashion ; evidently the meaning and significance of the film had been fully appreciated and did not appear to be unexpected to them. They conferred for a few moments, then two of them waved in the friendly manner which seemed to come naturally to them, babbled something incomprehensible, and strolled off towards their 'copter.

" I suppose we can bring the gear in now," commented Dave, making to lift the projector back inside the shuttle craft.

" Nay ostey marga," protested the Orontean who had first walked through their vessel's wall, in a language whose intonation was reminiscent of Norwegian. His voice had the curiously muffled quality which had become familiar, but its tone, his expression, and the thick hand waving from side to side, indicated plainly that he wanted the device left in position.

" Where do we go from here ?" demanded Laing.

" Do as the man asks, dear," chided Kim. " I think his friends have gone back to where ever they came from to bring some experts." She shivered a little as plants rippled and swayed around the ship. A gentle breeze was blowing and making some of the strange atoms of the atmosphere penetrate her suit and body. " I hope they aren't too long though, every movement of the air around here gives me goose-pimples again."

" Come inside," advised Lola, " the hull of the shuttle will give a little shelter."

The two girls disappeared for a few moments, returning eventually with some of Lola's cameras.

While the men kicked their heels and longed for the cigarette which they couldn't have, the female half of the Special Survey Team bustled about, recording the scene outside for posterity.

After about forty minutes, the helicopter crept over the horizon again, and corkscrewed its way to a landing close by. The original two who had departed, got out, and were followed by four others. One of the newest arrivals brought out an apparatus which was in several pieces and proceeded to assemble it near enough to the space shuttle that the Special Survey party could view it without venturing on to the Orontean soil again. It was a bulkier version of the Terrans' self-contained film projector, and required a cable which snaked back to the 'copter for a power supply, but it was efficient enough in its operation.

The remaining three of the latterly arrived aliens were seemingly older, as their brown hair had faded steakily in places to a nondescript colour, and their gait was just a little bit less easy than that of the original party's. There was about them the same indefinable air of camaraderie as there was around their compatriots, and the Terran party settled down to play their part in the information swapping session which they had initiated.

Conte pushed forward a cigarette box. " So now we come to the revelation which explains all, and I have the feeling that I'm going to need the help of the fragrant weed ; perhaps you'd like to join me ?"

The foursome accepted his offer and inhaled blue smoke appreciatively.

" How's your maths these days ?" asked Dave obliquely.

" Pretty rusty," admitted the Director cautiously. " Why?"

" You're going to need some of the early part of your advanced stuff," said the blond man.

The Director delved backwards through thirty years of memory. " Go on," he said resolutely, " I'm as prepared as I'll ever be, I suppose."

Laing opened his mouth to continue, but Kim, conscious of the Director's apprehension, interrupted before he could begin, with : " Let me try first—I had difficulty with this stuff myself." She picked up a pad and stylo from Conte's desk, and returned a facsimile of his enthusiastic smile. " Do you remember this ?" queried the slender red-head, pointing to the two straight lines she had drawn crossing at right angles on the paper. The horizontal one bore the legend ' +X ' at its right hand side and ' —X ' at the other end, while the vertical line was inscribed ' +Y ' at the top and ' —Y ' at the reverse position.

The sleek head nodded relievedly. "Yes, those are the simple co-ordinates in X and Y from early algebra."

An equally sleek but auburn head nodded in approval. " Now I'll change it a little—watch." She sketched in the lines again on a fresh sheet of paper, this time labelling the horizontal trace ' +1 ' and ' —1 ' instead of the X's, with ' +j ' and ' —j ' respectively at the top and bottom of the vertical one.

" The plot thickens," muttered the Director, his brow beginning to crinkle.

" Not to worry," smiled Kim, " this stuff isn't really as difficult as the maths boys would have us believe." Her stylo point swept from the intersection of the lines to the right. " Along here lie all positive quantities in mathematics, the plus sign merely indicates directions while the number following it indicates the amount. Similarly, the quantities in a diametrically opposite direction carry a negative prefix, meaning that they are equal to, but opposite in application, to the same numbered quantities on the right—O.K.?"

" Fair enough," confirmed Conte.

" Right," answered Kim emphasising the ' r.' " Now let's move on a little more. To change a quantity from being a positive one to a negative one, we have to rotate it through 180°, or if you like, multiply by minus 1."

" Elementary algebra," agreed the dapper man, " a plus times a minus equals a minus."

" Now," continued his mentor, " if we rotate the quantity through only 90° anticlockwise, it will lie here," she pointed to the vertical line labelled ' +j.'

Conte nodded at her questioning eyebrow.

" So we can consider we've multiplied by the square root of minus 1," said Kim, " because if multiplying by minus one means a 180° movement, and if going through two successive stages of 90° gets the same result, then the 90° movement must be the square root of minus one."

Conte's face and brow was unruffled again. " I seem to remember it being called ' i ' not ' j ',' " he said urbanely.

Ellis chipped in. " It depends which way you encountered it," he explained, " in pure maths it's ' i,' but in engineering parlance it's always ' j '."

The Director nodded. " Is that all the maths for today ?"

Kim returned his nod.

Conte's face became even more bland. " Then please tell me what all this has to do with Orontes II—incidentally, my dear, that was the most painless lesson I've ever had."

Lola took up the story. " We're all familiar with the concept of matter and anti-matter, terrene and contra-terrene ; and the only difference between them is a 180° difference in the direction of the particle's spin. This produces the equal and opposite charges of the electron and the positron for instance."

Again the sleek, dark head inclined towards them.

" Well," she went on, " this is all very nice and has been proved to be an actual fact, although we've not yet encountered the contra-terrene world of science-fiction. But nobody's ever carried the theory to its logical conclusion and postulated matter whose direction of rotation is only 90° removed from ours—jaymatter as we've dubbed it."

" So *that's* what we've got on Orontes II ?" queried Conte. " Well, I'm glad to hear that the first survey team to visit it are all right in the head after all." He paused reflectively. " What about this annihilation business with matter and C.T. matter ?"

" It doesn't apply here," answered the dark girl. " The Orontean matter *isn't* anti-matter—I suppose we could call it

half-matter, although that would be a misleading idea if pushed too far—so it only interferes with terrene matter in the way we've described. The fields of force around the two types of atom can cut through each other with only a temporary disturbance to either—gravitational attraction between them is reduced—sounds do not pass perfectly from one to another because the vibrations are in different planes and become polarised on transition—and last but not least, chemical combinations are not possible, hence the first Orontean to pass into a wholly Earth-type atmosphere nearly died of asphyxia."

" And you worked all this out for yourselves ?" asked the Director in a slightly awed tone.

The group exchanged glances.

" To be honest," volunteered Dave, " we didn't. You see the Orontean scientists who came on the second trip to us explained the whole thing with their diagrammatic film."

" They must be pretty nifty specimens at maths and physics," remarked the chief.

" They're no slouches," agreed Ellis, " but they did have one advantage."

" And that was ?" pressed Conte.

" Well," Ellis said, " only Orontes II itself was made of jaymatter, the asteroid belt and the other planets were normal enough. From time to time a meteorite of ordinary stuff would fall through the atmosphere and embed itself in the ground without being destroyed, so they had plenty of specimens to look at and experiment with long before they met us."

The Director stopped his nod of understanding half-way. " One moment. If the two types of matter merge when you try a contact, how could they get a meteorite out of the ground ?"

" In exactly the same way as we brought this chunk of jaymatter back with us," said Dave, dragging forward a suitcase. " Meteorites are practically pure nickel-iron and hence highly magnetic, so a magnet will do the necessary handling for us." He swung back the lid. Inside, firmly located between the poles of a horse-shoe, was a chunk of shadowy substance, jaymatter iron.

"Try passing your fingers through it," urged Kim, innocently.

Conte smiled. " No thanks. I'll let the lab-boys play around with it, I always was allergic to electric shocks."

The two couple left the office more than a little disappointed. For once the Director had had the first and the last laugh.

Russ Markham

Mr. Mackelworth's second story for us is considerably different to any we have recently published. Although it is outwardly a robot story, there is a very big difference in the manner of the telling.

I, THE JUDGE

by R. W. MACKELWORTH

This is to be a Show Trial.

I dislike them because Justice, like the age, has become theatrical enough, even the New Justice. There were certain rhetorical passions in my young days but they had retraint and poise.

The Trial will be very short. The screening companies have a tight timetable to meet. More to the point, the authorities prefer a demonstration that is short and useful.

The People heed the crack of the whip.

It was the conception that the best rule is arbitrary which overturned the ancient attitudes. It permitted expediency to become a law unto itself. Historians in their cups blame the inevitable changes to an inevitable reaction against Victorian dogma plus the hysteria of the " bomb " conscious, but I think it goes deeper than that. At one time Government was often confused with Justice. Now Justice is confused with Government. Why the mass of people do not understand that Justice is a process of legal logic, while politics are at best an opportunist's game, I just don't comprehend.

There is nothing much to hope for in the New Justice and sadly it is self perpetuating.

What is left of the old Justice ? There is the red plush chair, the judgment seat. I love to look at its empty presence. It slants backwards in a disdainful fashion as if the smell under its nose reeks of criminality. Then there is the white wig. They are both symbols, the only remnents of an old reality securely founded on equity.

Now we have the machine and I wish its lights would stop flickering at me. They remind me of the gibbering advertisements which flash from every vantage point in the City. There is no substance to them, only implication.

The wide, red, plastic desk in front of the chair, with its array of coloured buttons and tele-screens, jars the mind. In themselves these gadgets do no more than detract from personality. They are merely functional. In this glossy time it is easy to forget that emotions exist, but they do. Emotion like water gains strength from suppression.

A bell is ringing and I recognise my cue. I have been lurking behind the shining curtains that frame the dais. Like a stage-taut actor I am emerging with sufficient decorum and formality to impress, I hope, the wavering ideals of my vast audience. My face is set, perhaps through habit, into the implacable mask of stern impartiality. I hold to that. Many of the younger judges have the look of the wolf about them, aware as they are of the cameras and the Political Watch Committee.

Possibly my face is the reason they selected me for this trial. I feel that there is a yearning for some of the old values among the blind mass of the people again. They are shrewd fellows these rulers of ours. Appear to concede and the gullible are convinced that material concessions have been made. It is a matter of saving the public face, nothing more.

The crowded courtroom seems full of health and well-being. That is the reward for what they have lost. Single-minded direction has its consolation in achievement. Its bereavements result from the burial of individual will.

Their attention is on me. I can see the blur of faces as they look up and sense their interest in the unusual character which has survived beyond the age of character.

The Clerk is calling on the Court to rise. They do not bow. Instead they present me with the familiar salute and dutifully I return it. My repugnance could be taken for severity. The salute is the common expression of happy comradeship. I was never a happy comrade, possibly I preferred good manners.

Salute for the groceries and remember that the grocer is as good as you. Salute before every conversation. Some, it is said, salute prior to ablutions. I wonder whether they are the latter-day satirists ?

" The People against Peter Ladbroke."

I miss the old inner tension of this moment. It's as if they are drugged. Perhaps they are, despite the ban on tranquillisers. I miss the swiftly muttered ritual of former days too. The Latin and the comfortable preambles.

All the ties with the mystery of the Law were abandoned under compulsion. It was against the purpose of the People.

The truth was, the rulers realised that it was all beyond their own understanding and they *had* to understand to remain in power. They removed the spirit of the Law in order to use it more effectively as a weapon. In its new simplicity they found a ready procedure better than the ballot box. They created criminal law and political law and the latter code was the harshest.

There is no plea now of guilt or innocence. It is conceived that only the People may decide in judgment. They say that the plea is an anachronism, thus a man, it is decided, cannot state his own opinion of his innocence. A verdict contrary to his plea would make that plea an insult to the People's intelligent judgment.

I enjoyed the brazen " not guilty " of a confirmed criminal. It was a brave stirring of the flag before the battle.

The Counsel for the Defence has risen and is approaching the armoured glass of the screen. This screen is erected for my protection against the happy comrade who is also mad.

It is well to remember which Counsel represents Defence. It often comes out in political trials that he does no such thing. One of the new skills is to appear to do what is right, while doing, for the sake of advancement, what is decidedly wrong.

" I represent the Defence in this case, learned Judge, and my colleague, Counsel Daniel Clair appears for the Prosecution. I, Wilfred Gann, confirm that I will uphold the People's Justice and be subject to their will."

I loath this man Gann. He has appeared before me in every Show Trial and he pimps his smooth face and oily air like a new version of Uriah Heap. He must be a passable master of the billiard table since he is always at the correct angle for the camera. I suspect his mind is continually absorbed with mathematical probability rather than jurisprudence.

The Prosecution Counsel, Daniel Clair, is running through his introductory phrases now and there is a caustic bite to his words that is admirable. He, at least, is a worthy adversary. He is a man of hard intelligence with little to say that is not precise and to the point. He also has the asset, in my eyes, of manly good looks. I find that a favourable thing, though I shouldn't.

There are no overt, political leanings in his speeches, but one would say that his politics must be certain. It is just that he has the wisdom and sufficiency of good manners not to throw them at me or the cameras as the odious Gann is inclined to do. Perversely that is why Clair is always Prosecution and Gann eternally in Defence. Gann's bias is too obvious even for the stupid to swallow.

The bald head of the Clerk pops up from the bench in front of me. He is an individualist who ignores the common vogue for toupees. It is in these days allowable to uncover almost any part of the body but the head. His eyes, disguising his true feeling with professional ease, are earnestly enquiring.

" I must ask the learned Judge whether he takes note of the " Aid to Justice " presented to the Court by the People. You will recall, sir, that the Aid is provided in the sure knowledge that all men are open to error."

I incline my head to him and smile gently as if pleased with the gift of the people. " I take note of the Aid and am aware that it is never mistaken."

I am also aware that it is a damnable monster.

The " Aid to Justice " is the machine, of course. It is a little larger than I am, but it has the memory capacity of a thousand Judges. It needs that memory, for among its thousands of electronic parts there resides the one dogma of our time—the infallability of the Peoples' Justice. It is there to keep me on the straight and narrow paths. Those paths are as much the roads made by political expediency as routes for logic, but the masses believe in its rectitude, so it fills its purpose. I must admit I find its records of Case Law very useful.

It fills the wall on my right hand and it has a myriad flashing lights like winking eyes and one slotted mouth. The continual flashing sometimes sets off my migraine as I suspect is intended. Fortunately I still have the right to an adjournment. When I feel that the thing is punishing me for some slight deviation and my head is ready to burst, I adjourn rather than give in.

The time has not yet come when the argument needs to be decisive.

" The prisoner, Peter Ladbroke, is accused of giving aid and comfort to the enemies of the People and releasing, contrary to the will of the People, an alien slave. This slave was placed at his service so that he might achieve the proper status-rating of his occupation. It is accused that he wilfully released the slave and by so doing committed Economic Sabotage and Treason."

Gann has paused for effect and there is chatter from the spectators at the back of the Court. He is enhancing his reputation, or what he values as a reputation, by a quick, depreciating gesture towards the camera which seems to say, " I will do my best for this man, but as he doesn't stand a chance, take all I say with a pinch of salt."

There is a ripple of appreciative laughter.

I am pressing my buzzer and it is as much in rebuke at his gross behaviour as for silence.

I find time to look at the prisoner in that moment. Perhaps it is because my heart is full of anger at Gann, that I feel compassion for him. He has been under some form of sedation and his eyes are as lack-lustre as one of his own domesticated animals. What fancy radical do they see in him ?

The machine is chattering at me and the usual pattern of lights form the rhythm that hurts my head. I try to remember any edict which forbids a Judge indirect criticism of Counsel. To my knowledge there is none.

Instead, the pain turns out to be a call for attention. It is delivering a message, another of its functions. The thin, metallic, coil slips through my fingers coldly like a wet snake. It seems to be an extract from some Case Law, yet it is marked " Watch Committee." The machine didn't dig this out and I am a little shaken that the Committee have bothered.

It says : " We wish to remind the learned Judge that, in the case of The People versus Pampdon, it was ruled that a slave-holder could be found guilty of both Economic Sabotage and Treason if he executed a deed freeing the slave from bondage. The deed effectively enfranchised the slave and technically gave him the right to payment for services. This slave, not being a person recognised as racially human, was put in the position of any other citizen. Nevertheless the deed in itself was a valid legal document, only Pampdon's action was illegal."

The message is interesting because it smells of anxiety. Our Masters have fears as numerous as beetles in rotten wood. The machine has the case recorded and if it was pertinent it would have thrown it up at me. The machine never has moments of weakness but apparently the Watch Committee do.

The Government are worried about this case not for the sake of Ladbroke's crime, but because Professor Kulmann made a discovery last year. The discovery was that an element of coherent intelligence could be attributed to the Martian slaves, never before suspected. They form the bulk of our unpaid, alien, labour force.

Kulmann found it expedient, in a time of expediency, to run. His proposition was too dangerous to exist unchallenged. It was rather like finding a dog who could explain why he did parlour tricks, there was a risk that he might learn too much and give up performing.

You will know that the humanoid race of Mars is both dumb and deaf and admirably suited to basic labour. Their character is simple, devoted and cheerful, yet they apparently lack the aggressive intent to think. It is usual to find that their usefulness depends on supervision and if left, they drop into a trance of inactivity.

Kulmann says that these trances are not mindless and he made some startling experiment with electronic equipment on their brainwaves which proved hidden depths of personality. He had no time to explain further.

The Government want to lay Kulmann and his idea. First they must brand him as a radical.

The Martian usefulness makes the policy of " Separate Rights " possible, in fact it is the cornerstone of our whole economic purpose. If the Martians are given rights, then there would have to be readjustment of the differential for classes of human beings as well. The system of control might then break down and with it our prosperity.

" I wish to contend, learned Judge, that my client signed the Deed delivering this slave from bondage, whilst under the influence of certain radical elements." Gann gives one of his eternal pauses for the cameras. He has made the point he has been instructed to make. Sympathy is with Ladbroke, so they make the mitigation of his crime an attack on Kulmann. If opinion accepts the mitigation it has to condemn Kulmann. " I submit that this could happen to any of us here. He was

misled by men with devious and wicked minds. He has seen how wrong he was and he is repentant. I would ask the Court to give him your understanding and to find a way for his realease."

Gann's address is delivered to the cameras rather than the Jury. The Jury is merely advisory. At one time they gave the verdict, now they recommend and the Judge and his Aid give the verdict. In any case the Jury deserve their reputation as "twelve picked men and true." Counsels normally have a tendancy to address the Judge out of necessity rather than respect.

They would do well to ignore the Judge and concentrate their sole attention on the Aid.

I feel an ugly temptation to involve myself with Gann. He needs to be taught the elementary responsibility of a Counsel to his client, politics notwithstanding.

"I think you would be well advised, Mr. Gann, not to elaborate your opening remarks for the benefit of the cameras. We are trying the crime already specified, not radical influences."

The cameras have swung on to me, their blind eyes peeping avidly, recording the beads of sweat on my brow and every unconscious movement. Odd that I think of cameras as being blind yet seeing. Perhaps it is because they are indiscriminate.

I am highly satisfied with my attack on Gann, however, and Clair is smiling in the Court which I do not suppress.

"I have concluded my opening address, learned Judge," Gann is bowing his head and muttering some sarcasm to his junior. His eyes moved significantly to the Aid as he sat down and I think that it is reforming its simple pain pattern.

"It is my duty to place the Charge formally before the Court." Clair has risen and his eyes are firmly on me. "As already put to you by Counsel Gann, this man is accused under Article sixty of the Criminal Code, with Economic Sabotage and Treason. We, the Prosecution, intend to show good proof of this charge and to ask for the maximum penalty."

Under the New Justice, the Defence puts that Charge informally before the Prosecution. It often happens that the Charge mysteriously alters between the Defence address and the Prosecution address at trials in camera. The idea is that it sounds less obnoxious in the mouth of the Defence Counsel however.

"I would like to call my first witness, if the learned Judge agrees." Gann's voice is petulant. I think he hoped the machine would chastise me.

The witness is described in my notes as Galbad Singh, an Overseer on the Ladbroke farm.

He is tall, with a deep etching of bitterness on his face. I see that his Indian ancestry is remote. No doubt he uses a name he has little right to, perhaps out of conceit.

" You are Galbad Singh ?"

" I am."

" Who is your employer ?"

" Peter Ladbroke of Ladbroke Farm."

" Can you identify him ?"

The man indicates the prisoner with an angry gesture of his thin hand.

Clair is looking at him with cold intensity and I share his feelings about the man's obvious bias against his employer.

" Counsel Gann asked you to identify him. Please do so with proper restraint."

He reacts to my words with a certain, quick, flash of his eyes, which seems to be part fear and part anger. He points at the prisoner with a subdued movement.

" Did your employer consort with radical elements ?"

" What bearing, Mr. Gann, does this question have on the case ?" My voice is icy. One gets used to questions from Defence that seem to throw away the prisoner's chance, but the double talk is couched so that the Government's purpose is declared under a pretext of proper questions.

" My object is to show that my client was deliberately brainwashed into this action by Kulmann and his lackeys."

" Your object was nothing of the sort, Mr. Gann."

He is quite white with anger and the Aid again shows its real purpose by flickering furiously at me until I am trembling with pain.

" I have no more questions."

Clair is rising to cross question for the Prosecution.

" Did your master own the slave Metl ?"

" Yes."

" Tell me what you witnessed on the night of March 19th, 1994, at the farmhouse ?"

" I saw Ladbroke sign a document. He gave the document to Metl and told him he was free."

" What was the document ?"

" It was the Deed freeing Metl from bondage."

" You saw it and read it ?"

" I did and witnessed it."

There is silence in Court ; the silence of death.

In the Peoples' Court, I must explain that leading questions are allowed. It is expedient to bring all evidence to light quickly. It is the change I regret most and I have wept in the night thinking about it.

" That is all." Clair salutes the witness.

" You may go." My voice sounds oddly cold and indifferent on the loudspeakers. I remember all the flame of my youth in a country that managed to remain half pagan, even through the age of atomics. I could play a guitar or a bull. I came to this country at the persuasion of my father, to learn law. The Law in those days had something in common with the fiery music of the guitar and the tension of the bullring, if one had the eye to find its conflict poetic, beneath the daily ritual.

Gann is staring at me quizzically.

" I said, learned Judge, that I have no more witnesses."

" Have you any more witnesses, Mr. Clair ?"

The case is open and shut and there is no need of further support for the written evidence.

" Only one, learned Judge."

There is a curious sparkle in Clair's eyes. He has some card to play which will have to be interesting, since it is seemingly unnecessary. Clair likes to act independently and one never knows what to expect.

" I call Metl."

The Court is standing to a man. The gay, garish clash of their clothes conflicts with the pale, blue, walls that descend from me to the great glass doors at the main entrance.

This is the first time that an alien has appeared in Court.

The Aid is humming and the lights have adopted a meaningless pattern. They are as numerous as raindrops and as random. It has abandoned the pain pattern though I feel a certain weakness in my right arm and leg, which might be an effect or just the drag of old age. It is seeking for a precedent which its political motive can use as a rational point of attack.

A coil is springing from its slotted mouth and reaching towards me. It reads, " There is no precedent for this action. Forbid it !"

I have always thought that feeding political policy into the Aid would make it less a logical machine than a dictator of ideas. I must admit that I am shocked by Clair's action as well. Surely he knows the implications ?

I pick up the closed circuit microphone and give a considered reply. " This Martian is enfranchised by Deed. How can I forbid it ?"

" The enfranchisement is only technical. In addition it is without precedent. You must forbid it pending an inquiry." The coil spat out at me and I am sure that the machine is objecting to my contradiction of its political impulse. It is almost emotional.

I answer, " There are precedents for conviction on a technicality, so I cannot stop his appearance merely because his right to appear is only technical."

Immediately the pain rhythm starts to build up. I wonder in the red depths of my headache whether I should call an adjournment. Then it occurs to me that the Aid is trying to force me into just such a position. I am convinced that I must hold out.

It is the first time that I welcome the interference of the Watch Committee. The glum face of their hatchet man, Dabrushkin, has appeared on the personal screen. He is always under pressure and I could work up some concern for him. He has looked on the wine too often and his blood pressure is high. It shows in his mottled complexion and the slur of his voice.

" My dear Judge, I gather that the Trial is going well ?"

His questions are always like that, in the social code of the hierarchy he means that he doesn't understand what's happening. I nod to him. There is some satisfaction in keeping him worried.

" Clair has adopted a rather surprising procedure, hasn't he?"

He is fishing for information and his anxiety is obvious.

" The Martian is a deaf mute. If Clair can't handle him, I would be wrong in my impression of his ability." I am looking him straight in the eye and to my relief he is not suspicious. " You must admit that if the Martian implicates Kulmann in this case, it would be a windfall. It would be a major victory for us."

" You and I are impartial in this affair, Judge, but your sentiment does you credit. However there is something about his action which worries me. Unfortunately, the rest of the Council are away." His approach becomes confidential. " I must admit that isn't the only thing, Judge."

" Oh ?"

" The duplicate of your Aid at my Office has broken down. I am unable to read its copy of your machine's reactions." He pauses and there is a glint of doubt in his eye. " We will have to trust you to take proper note of its—advice."

It is fantastic that he hasn't understood; after all, he has the right kind of training. I think I can thank the bottle for taking the sharper edge from his intellect. I am glad to see his face erased from the screen. The machine has a clearer idea of the situation and it is putting up a fiercer struggle.

Metl is like a great, black bear, only the gentle face contradicting the impression of tremendous, latent animal strength. His face is white and almost similar in character to a Westerner's. There is an introspective quality about it that makes me feel Kulmann was on to something after all.

His size could be over-awing. Physical makeup has a great effect on personality and human relationship. It is true that big creatures very often have the habit of gentleness. He is smiling from the tiny witness box and there is refinement in his smile. I can see that the people present are warming to him.

Clair is addressing him. " Metl, you can understand what I am saying, because you have learned to read my lips. I want you to answer by nodding or shaking your head."

Metl nods firmly.

It occurs to me that Kulmann said nothing about lip reading and that Metl should be a hostile witness but Clair is treating him very gently. Martians are normally given orders by simple demonstration, implemented by a kick or blow. There is nothing quite so nauseating as a small man seen striking one of these giants.

" Good. Did your Master give you your freedom ?"

He nods and there is a glowing light in his eyes which would be impossible for an Earthman. I am intrigued by his intense life. Death is so near on Mars that Earth must seem a paradise. Whatever his means of communication, I am also convinced that he does not understand the question.

" Did your master give you this document, signed by him, proving that you are indeed free ?"

Again the nod of the head.

" That is all learned Judge."

Clair has made no attempt to implicate Kulmann. If Dabrushkin doesn't realise this, then he is really fuddled. Even through my private hell of pain I see the whole picture emerging.

Unexpectedly and against form, Gann asks permission to cross-question. This is the sort of thing that he will not usually do, if there is a chance that it may be wrong for him personally. I can see that Clair is worried about this questioning.

" Is it true that your Master was influenced by a man called Kulmann ?"

Metl nods his head and beams happily at the Court.

How can Gann be so stupid ? He is so overwhelmed by his urge to drag in Kulmann's name that he has set the seal on what Clair is trying to do.

The significant question in this trial has been asked. The crucial moment of truth that comes in all good trials—and this isn't a good trial. I am sure that if I recalled Metl and asked him if black was white, he would nod. Clair must have anticipated Gann's question and is only worried in case he didn't ask it. He knows that Metl will nod to any questions. I suppose he enlisted the help of the Militia Special Branch who taught Metl to nod when addressed. That would be the branch that calls itself Alien Psychology. I hope they were gentle with him.

Clair has been very cunning. He has provided the Government with the answer they wanted from this farce. It will seem so genuine. One would have expected Metl to defend his Master, the man who has done most for him, instead he has condemned him. He should have been biased toward Ladbroke, instead he has established Ladbroke's connection with Kulmann at the most emotional depth.

The machine is mad with activity but I have become suddenly inured to its attack. There are issues here beyond the common lot of pain.

" May I submit Exhibit A to the Jury ?"

Clair has the Deed that freed Metl.

" You may."

The Deed has been examined by experts and they have submitted their written testimony that the signature is Ladbroke's and a valid one under the Law of Contract.

The Law of Contract is the main principle of our culture. It allows property and control of the person to rest in the Rulers. It is an invulnerable law. It must be. Otherwise they would need an army in total control. They dare not admit that a contract properly drawn up is not enforceable. If they did, then others might question the justice of their own contracts.

Ladbroke's crime lies in making a contract that is against the People. This is a departure from the old conception, of course. In former days an illegal contract was void from inception. Now it is still technically valid, but the man who made it is nevertheless guilty.

Clair has returned to the centre of the Court.

" I submit that a case has been made out for the conviction of the prisoner, learned Judge."

" I am eager to know whether you intend to put your client in the witness box, Mr. Gann ?" I am prepared to put one more nail in the coffin for what it's worth.

" My client is a sick man, learned Judge." Gann is anxious to hide the handiwork of the Militia.

" I will have him speak !"

" As the learned Judge pleases."

My comment has produced another coil from the Aid but I am not going to read it. The coil will recall a dozen precedents where the Judge interfered with the course of the trial in such a manner and played havoc with Justice.

A stolid policeman is bringing Ladbroke to the witness box. He has a firm grip on his arm, as much to support him as anything else. I hate intimidation but I must overlook much to gain a little.

" Peter Ladbroke, tell me why you think you have been brought to this Court ?"

He is attempting to find words and his face is contorted with effort. There is a sigh of compassion from the spectators. His face and his voice are telling his true story.

" I freed Metl."

There is a hollow ring to his answer but he was once a fine man. He has seen many changing seasons without dismay but now he is an empty castle.

" Why did you free Metl ?"

" Because he—" he stutters and the policeman is leaning towards him muttering. His grip on his arm has tightened and it is obvious to the whole Court that he is intimidating the man. I do nothing about it.

" I was forced to do it by Kulmann." Ladbroke looks suddenly relaxed as if he has cribbed a difficult answer like a naughty schoolboy.

There is a burst of excited chatter and I press my buzzer for silence.

" Was there no other reason ?"

The agony on Ladbroke's face is heartbreaking.

At the back of the Court, Metl is on his feet and his face is striving visibly with some tearing passion. I can almost feel his immense desire to express himself. I can see that the agony of his Master has touched him in some way, perhaps he has felt or seen what he cannot hear.

Then my eye is taken by the strange pattern of lights on the Aid. At first they are just a jumble of flashing colours then gradually they merge until they have strength and intention. The intention is full of a subtle pleasure and I feel secure and free of pain. I know that this is not the machine's own doing. It has more to do with Metl. I think it is his way of expressing the real reason for his freedom. He and Ladbroke were friends.

Many millions will know this too because the cameras were on me when the Martian touched the electronic guts of the Aid with his mind. The reflection of the lights must have been caught by the cameras and with them emotional responses emanating from Metl.

They will take Metl to the Mars ferry now, of course. They may have to expel every Martian. His rights were only technical because under the usual practice a free alien is not allowed to land on Earth. Aliens are made slaves by right of conquest as soon as they are captured on their home planet. It all depends, this system, on the common idea that aliens are no better than animals, usefully domesticated animals.

The advisory Jury has reached a verdict. The Chairman is waiting for my attention.

" We recommend a verdict of Not Guilty."

The machine is back to itself and pushing out a coil. It reads, " There have been many cases where a man was found not guilty because of incapacity at the time of the crime. Uphold the verdict."

This is what they want. The rulers have made their point with Kulmann now they see the mood of the People and wish to show mercy for Ladbroke. Curry favour so that they can safely hang the real victim.

I am very sorry for Ladbroke, but he is a pawn, and if I must make him suffer, then it is for a greater cause then either of us. I cannot risk the good that Clair has attempted. In admitting Metl as a witness he made all aliens truly enfranchised. He set them free. Now I must finish what he started.

I speak to the Court and the listening millions.

" I will sum up this trial briefly, since under the New Justice, like the Jury, the Judge is merely a function of expediency. I want you to think what you have tried to day.

" The Law is turned inside out for the Peoples' use but it is still the Law. You may say that it is evident in every action of the Court, the method by which it finds a verdict and the fact that a machine has the final word, that the People are well served. Never have such precautions been so carefully taken to make sure that the Court's purpose is clear.

" Therefore, I will take this Justice to its logical end. The Contract is invulnerable and Ladbroke made a contract. He did it knowing it was wrong, not because he was ill or drunk or stupid, but because with wicked audacity he thought an intelligent being should be free. Ignore Kulmann, whether he influenced him or not doesn't matter. The crime stands by itself as in Law it must. If the Law says it is wrong to carry out some action, even if it be a morally right action, the man that does it is guilty.

" I must therefore condemn Ladbroke to death as required by your Law and over-rule the Jury's recommendation of Not Guilty."

There is uproar and the machine is going through the phases prior to contradicting my verdict with its oral mechanism. There is little time left. I must stop it from pronouncing. It pays to know your enemy and I can put it out of action by pushing this paper knife up into the slot and twisting it.

There is a red notice over the slot which reads, " It is fatal to tamper with the Aid," but that matters little to an old man. It is necessary to make the New Justice stink in the nostrils of the People, to make them see where its process carries them. I must also hide the damage that Clair has done to the Government by bringing Metl into Court. In him there is hope.

If I allowed this case to come to a smooth finish the rulers would realise that he produced unnecessary evidence from Metl and then they would realise why. He is of course a radical, one of Kulmann's associates.

The Aid is about to transmit its verdict of Not Guilty over the loudspeaker and I must short circuit it. All I have to do is twist the knife so . . .

R. W. Mackelworth

In the not-too-distant future, the Moon will undoubtedly become an advance base for Mankind's investigation of the home planets. In this intriguing serial, author Tubb visualises some of the ramifications we can expect when various bases are set up on our satellite.

WINDOW ON THE MOON

by E. C. TUBB

Part Two of Three Parts

foreword

Not far in our present future, the British, Americans, Russians and Chinese have established bases on the Moon, ostensibly for scientific research, but in view of the unsettled political situation on Earth, each base is, in effect, an armed strongpoint spying on the others. The British base, comprising mixed personnel, is the only one with a huge panoramic window facing the globe of Earth, the others relying upon electronic eyes.

Making the best of a bad job, the British develop numerous research programmes under the direction of Sir Ian MacDonald, the top secret one being ABIC (Artificial Biochemical Integration Computer), an electronic brain grown from the basic elements of life, but which, at present, apparently does nothing except exist. In charge of ABIC is Professor Reginald Ottoway, assisted by Professor Jeff Carter.

A Royal Commission arrives at the base to obtain a report on the experiments and necessary expenditure, bringing with them Professor Felix Larsen, officially a technician due to instal new

laser-beam defences, but who is also a special agent for the Government. Felix is conducted round the base by Avril Simpson, a dietician, but soon becomes sick under the lesser gravity, is put to bed and administered by Dr. Gloria Brittain. When he recovers he suspects that he has been purposely drugged and questioned under scopolamine.

Dr. Brittain warns Felix about becoming emotionally involved with Avril Simpson, pointing out that the social mores on the Moon are somewhat different to those on Earth. Later, Felix reports to Sir Ian, who informs him that he will be working with Major Jack Crombie, in charge of the base's defences, and they join the Commission being conducted round the laboratories. Despite considerable natural resentment at the Commission's intrusion, Felix notices that there is a strange sense of integration between all the members at the base and no social castes appear to exist, even between the military and civilian personnel.

Major Crombie takes Felix to the Eyrie, the lookout window, and Felix begins to suspect that the Major is a paranoic with delusions of grandeur. They leave by means of a spiral chute and Felix is so thrilled by the experience that he returns to the Eyrie to do it again. He arrives in time to prevent one of the soldiers strangling a woman named Shena Dawn, who is apparently quite unconcerned over the incident. Felix hastens to the military quarters to apprehend Shena's attacker, reaching the man's room just as he is about to commit suicide. Too late, Felix watches the man pull the trigger of a rifle pointing into his mouth. The cartridge, however, does not explode although the primer has been struck by the firing pin.

seven

General Klovis, commander of United States Star Base One, thoughtfully stripped the cellophane from a cigar and put it in his mouth. As commander he had certain privileges, one of them being the right to smoke at any time he chose, but it was a right he refused to use. A commander, he insisted, should have an affinity with his men and so he confined his cigar smoking to the few periods during the day when general smoking was permitted. He didn't know that, far from being appreciated, his self-imposed hardship was derided by his men. They took the logical line that if top brass couldn't do as they wanted then what was the use of being top brass ? Also, they

didn't believe the General played fair even though the air-crews solemnly swore that it was so.

" It's been a long time," said Klovis sombrely. " Maybe that Limey ship is in trouble ?"

" If they are they haven't asked for help." Major Tune, the second in command, dragged hungrily at his cigarette. " How about sending them a message ?"

" No."

" Why no ? Pete's in position and it will only take a minute."

Pete was the automatic radio-relay satellite orbiting the moon for, without the reflecting blanket of a heavyside layer, radio communication was on line-of-sight only. It was just another problem men had to face when living in a vacuum.

Klovis shook his head. " You're not thinking straight, Tune. If we radio an offer of assistance and they refuse, then that ends it. If, on the other hand, we were to pay a personal visit, we might learn something." He rose and brushed his cigar ash from his tunic. " This needs careful handling. Major Crombie is prickly when it comes to a question of territorial rights."

Tune didn't smile but he felt like doing so. Like most of his compatriots he had little admiration for the British, privately thinking of them as the decadent remains of a once-great power. They had had their day and now there were other, newer powers in the world. Russia, China, the African Confederacy, still weak as yet but promising to flower in the near future, the South American Republic and, of course, the United States.

And, for almost half a decade, the United States had considered itself to be the one great champion and protector of Western freedom. Against such power and against such an ideal the British contribution seemed small indeed. Tune did not stop to remember that, without the British, there would have been no freedom to defend. But politicians are notorious for short memories.

" Washington will want to know about that unscheduled landing," he reminded as they left the office. " They probably know already but if we can tell them about it we'll show we're on the ball."

" Washington, Moscow, Peking, they'll all want to know." Klovis scowled. " It's getting so that a man can't spit on this

goddamn moon without every nation wanting to know just why."

His anger was artificial, a defence against his reluctance to act the spy. Naturally generous, like all his race, he did what had to be done but he didn't have to like it. And unlike Tune, he actively admired the struggles of the British to retain their independence while, at the same time, confounded by their logic which refused to admit they didn't stand a snowball's chance in hell of going it alone.

" Break out the big runner," he ordered. " Load it with cigars—no, they don't smoke over there. Well, stack it with candy and junk for the chicks, magazines and such. There's no sense in going empty-handed."

" How about the crew, General ?" Tune looked hopeful and Klovis knew why, but there was no chance of both of them going and, for once, he intended to pull his rank.

" Just me and the driver and a relief," he said. " It'll be enough. No, wait ! We'd better take Rasch while we're at it. He can be the relief driver. O.K.?"

" Right, General." Tune moved away to supervise the readying of the ground-runner and Klovis could tell he was disappointed. It was odd how important the sight of a real woman became when they were not available.

It was a problem unique to the Americans. There were no women on their base. There were substitutes, busty, leggy pin-ups of females who were more anatomical freaks than normal women, but that was all. Klovis deplored the system but was powerless to do anything about it. The very prospect of tender young American girlhood being subjected to the brutal intimacy of soldiers was enough to bring every member of every woman's club screaming to her feet in angry protest. Even the logical alternative was equally condemned. The sanctity of marriage and the chastity of men were, to the vote-powerful women, of greater importance then their mental and physical well-being. And the politicians had no choice but to obey those who commanded the vote.

The results, even with a one-year change-over, were predictable. Klovis knew that his problems of morale would be solved if he were permitted to mix his personnel. As it was, he managed with a mixture of blindness, ignorance and hope.

Rasch was in his laboratory. He looked up as the General entered, having walked more than a mile through a tunnel

bored through the solid rock to a point where interference from the base apparatus would be at a minimum.

" Did you want me, General ?"

" Later. How's it going ?"

" As well as we can expect."

Rasch leaned back in his chair. He was a thin, scholarly-looking man who wore rimless spectacles and who always seemed out of place in uniform. He was a ballistics expert but now he was in full charge of the paraphysical laboratory with the blessing of Congress, who seemed to think it money well spent. Most of his waking hours were spent, with two assistants, in searching the unknown for the barely suspected. Klovis doubted if he would ever make any kind of important discovery but his activities kept three men fully occupied and anything which kept men's minds from their own problems was, to the General, a thing to be encouraged.

" We've been getting more signals," said Rasch after a moment. " You remember I told you about them ?"

Klovis nodded.

" They're odd things," continued Rasch. " They don't register on any of the apparatus we have to record the normal electromagnetic spectrum. They are erratic and vary in strength. It was only by sheer chance that we detected them in the first place."

" Could they be messages ?"

" They are on a telepathic level," said Rasch. He, to Klovis's constant irritation, had a habit of simply ignoring anything said while he was in the middle of one of his discourses. " At least," he corrected himself, " they are on a level which I have reason to suspect is that of emitted thought. Certainly they do not register on any other apparatus and the instruments I have devised do not respond to any regular radiation used in communication."

" Can you actually register thought ?" Klovis was doubtful. " I mean, if you could, you would actually be registering the presence of sentient life."

" I am aware of that," said Rasch primly. " And, yes, I can register what can only be thought."

" Telepathy ?"

" No, not yet."

" Then—?"

" I can register a disturbance in the peculiar region I have named Zero X. The name means nothing and is only a label. Now, if this room were empty there would be zero stimulus and zero recording. When a person comes within range of the instrument it shows a decided reaction. That reaction comes directly from the mind."

" Now wait a minute !" Klovis was no scientist but he wouldn't have been what he was if he were totally ignorant of other fields and he wouldn't have been where he was if he had known nothing of logic.

" That gadget of yours could be responding to the radiated heat of the body, the sonic beat of the heart or respiration, anything."

" Please." Rasch was offended. " I have thought of, and eliminated, all those possibilities and many more you haven't even thought about. When I say that it reacts to mental thought, that is exactly what I mean. But it doesn't mean that we have found a means of reading distant thoughts, though that may be the logical outcome of the discovery."

" Heaven help us," breathed Klovis. " Why not ?"

" There is too much noise. It is like listening to the traffic sounds of a city when you don't quite know what you are listening to. You hear a constant roar, not individual sounds, even though the roar is made up of an accumulation of parts."

" All right." Klovis was getting annoyed with the other's habit of impersonalised lecturing when asked a simple question. " These signals you've been receiving, couldn't they have come from the base ?"

" Impossible."

" Are you going to tell me why ?"

" The strength of the reaction. Even at full amplification I can only just register a mind within a short distance. These odd signals are tremendously strong—that is how I've managed to get a bearing on them."

" You've what !"

" Taken a bearing." Rasch was startled at the General's reaction. " Didn't I tell you ? I managed to rig up a few detectors and I've had them planted at various spots well outside the base. From then on it was only a matter of time before I obtained all the cross-bearings I needed to locate the source of the signals."

" That proves it." Klovis was bitter. " The Reds have found a new method of sending signals . Won't Washington be pleased to hear this !"

" The Reds ?" Rasch looked blank. " What are you talking about, General ? Where do they come in ?"

" The signals ! You tracked them back to their base, didn't you ?"

" No. I didn't say that. They don't come from the Russians or the Chinese either. Those signals come from our friends. They have their source in the British Section."

The ground-runner wasn't the most comfortable means of transport ever devised but it wasn't too bad even over rough terrain. Giant wheels rose high above the rounded body, their broad, edged treads clawing their way up inclines and supporting the weight of the machine over suspected patches of dust. That dust, powder-fine, could fill and hide quite deep craters and such traps were best avoided.

Inside it was clean, warm and relatively quiet, only the soft whine of the electric motors fed from ranked banks of powerful Jangner batteries broke the silence as they drove the huge wheels. Leaning back in his cushioned seat General Klovis treated himself to a cigar.

" That's a nice smell, General." The driver grunted as he dodged a shattered slide of detritus. " Would it be all right if I had a smoke too ?"

It wouldn't be all right and Klovis knew it. The air within the small cabin could only take a certain amount of contamination and if the driver had his way the smoking time would be cut by half.

" One cigarette," he compromised. " After that you chew gum and like it."

" I'll chew it but I won't like it." The driver lit his cigarette. " How long are we staying, General ?"

He was excited and Klovis knew why, but he had bad news for the man.

" Not long. You're going to stay with the runner and get it recharged. Now I mean that ! If I find you've been chasing those chicks I'll throw you in the brig !"

" Hell, General, can't a man have any fun ?"

" Not that sort." Klovis turned as Rasch came crawling from the rear. The man had taken the first drive-shift over the

familiar ground around the base. Now, freshly awake, he looked like a myopic owl.

" God, the air's thick in here," he complained. " I woke up thinking I was in a night club."

" Have you ever been in a night club, Captain ?" The driver, cigarette hanging from the corner of his mouth, scowled as he guided the vehicle. Deliberately he blew a plume of smoke against the viewport. Klovis crushed out his cigar.

" Smoking time's over," he rapped. " You heard me, driver."

For a moment he was afraid the man would refuse and wondered just what he would do if he did. Any punishment would have to come later but what would he do if faced by outright mutiny ? Shoot the man, he supposed. Both were armed but he doubted if he could bring himself to fire first. Then the man crushed out his cigarette and the danger was over. Yet, almost constantly, Klovis was aware of the too-thin barrier between obedience and defiance. Loyalty should have made that barrier stronger than steel but, on the moon, loyalty had a strangely empty sound.

" That's better," said Rasch as the fans sucked the foul air through the conditioners. " How much further have we to go?"

" A few hours yet. How about fixing some coffee and chow ?"

The food, sealed in thermal containers, only needed the thrust of a thumb to break the seal and start the chemical reaction. They waited until the lids popped and the aroma of coffee and stew filled the compartment.

" Not bad." Rasch spooned up the last of his food and drained his container of coffee. " Do you think we'll be welcome, General ?"

" I doubt it, but they can hardly refuse to charge our batteries and MacDonald isn't a bad type really." Klovis looked at the driver. " Do you want to stop and eat ?"

" I can manage." The driver ate with his eyes on the viewport, nursing his controls and temper both. Something, decided the General, would have to be done about him when they returned.

In the meantime he had other things to think about. If he hoped to learn anything about that mysterious ship he had to get inside the station and that meant having a reasonable

excuse. The Director, he knew, was usually only too pleased to see him but that was when things were normal. No man can be expected to welcome an unwanted visitor especially if he is trying to hide something.

Klovis smiled as he thought over what Rasch had told him before they had left the base ; pleased at the thought of the British having pulled a fast one in the field of communications. Then he sobered at an ugly thought. Liaison between their two countries was far too close for any such discovery to have remained a secret and, had it been developed in an allied laboratory to the point where it could be used, then his base would be equipped with it now.

The alternative was that it had been developed by the common enemy and, if so, there was only one reason why those special signals had been tracked to the British station. An enemy agent was sending out secret information. Klovis had found his excuse.

eight

High on the mountain above the station, five figures moved like tiny gleaming dolls in the full glare of the sun. They were roped in line and Felix, sweating with effort, was in the centre. Before him, inches from the viewport of his helmet, the eroded stone passed slowly downwards as he clawed his way up the steep slope.

A voice spoke quietly in his ear.

" Do you want to go to the same place as last time, Felix, or shall we try further to the right."

That was Sergeant Echlan in charge of the detail which had accompanied Felix on each of his several ' inspection ' trips to determine the positioning of the new weapons. One site had been chosen and he decided to settle on the other without further delay.

" The same place," he said into the radio. " It's about the best we can find within the working limitations."

" Good."

High above, the slope yielded to a crest of shattered stone before soaring again in crevassed escarpments. The crest hid a tiny plateau scored with crevasses and offered the best site available for the laser.

" It's going to be a hell of a job lugging the gear up here," grumbled a voice. " Let's hope they've packed it for portage."

" We can drag it up with ropes if they haven't," said another. " Anyway, that isn't our grief. That's what technicians are for."

Echlan cut across the chatter.

" Save your breath for climbing," he snapped. " Murray, wake up down there ! Your rope is too slack !"

" Sorry, Sarge."

" Let's get a move on. We're in direct sunlight, remember."

It was one of the things Ross, back at the station, had warned him about.

" Your body is generating heat all the time," he'd told Felix. " That heat can only be lost by radiation or conduction through the suit touching the rock. The suit is pretty well insulated so you're more likely to fry than freeze. But if you stay in direct sunlight too long you'll cook like an egg in boiling water, so stay in the shadow as much as possible."

" I'll remember," said Felix. " Anything else ?"

" Not much." Ross had fussed with the suit as he adjusted it to size. "The air supply is automatic and you'll be in constant radio communication with the station and with the rest of the party. The main thing is to keep calm no matter what happens. Panic can kill you. If anything goes wrong just sit tight and yell for help." He'd stepped back, finally satisfied. " Right, that should do it. Just keep it on and walk about for a while and you'll soon get used to it."

It had taken less time than Felix had imagined to grow accustomed to the suit. Now, he felt quite an old hand.

Echlan reached the crest and drew himself over the edge, snagging the rope around a jutting spur of rock. As Felix reached it in turn he admired the deft way the rope had been secured and guessed the sergeant was no stranger to mountaineering.

" You've climbed before," he said and Echlan chuckled.

" We all have, Felix. Snowdon, Corefell, even a spell attached to the Alpine Brigade." His voice sharpened. " Watch it there, Murray ! Damn it man, watch where you're treading !"

The last man to reach the crest swayed then lunged forward as rock crumpled and fell from beneath his boot. The fragment

fell, slowly to Felix's eyes, bounding down the slope and to the ground below.

" Clever !" Echlan was sarcastic. " Are you trying to wear these mountains down on your very own, Murray ? You could have given someone downstairs a nice headache."

" I'm sorry, Sarge."

" You should be. Well, let's get out of this sun."

They dispersed, vanishing into patches of inky blackness adopting, Felix knew, the same defensive positions they did on each trip. It had taken him a while to grow used to the system and he still found it a little amusing.

Echlan sat beside him, and he mentioned it.

" If you were a soldier you'd understand a lot better, Felix. Each time we come out we're on active service and have to act that way. If we ever do get attacked there'll be no time for extra training. That's why I went off at Murray. A thing like that could betray our position."

" Do you think we'll ever be attacked ?"

" I hope not, but there's always the possibility." He hesitated. " Maynard is back on duty now. Gloria reported him fit just before we left."

" Good, I'm glad to hear it." It was his turn to hesitate. " He had a touch of migraine, didn't he ?"

Echlan chuckled softly as if to himself. " Something like that," he said, then ; " You're all right, Felix. You're all right."

It was a compliment and he took it as such, knowing that it was the sergeant's way of thanking him for having used his discretion. Idly he wondered if Echlan guessed the truth and then knew that it was a stupid question. The sergeant knew his men and was far from being a fool. Gloria, too, had been discreet.

She had come at his call, assessed the situation in a glance and taken the numb and dazed soldier to the hospital. There, Felix guessed, she would have used drugs and hypnotherapy to ease the tormented mind and break the closed spiral of his emotional crisis. She had said nothing of the matter to Felix and he had said nothing to anyone else. The man was sick, that was all, and now he was better. The incident was closed.

The organism that was the station had healed itself.

" Let's get on with it." Felix heaved himself to his feet and strode to the selected position. Carefully he plotted the site,

marking the rock with wide streaks of chalk, finding it difficult to bend against the constriction of the suit.

" From here," he pointed out, " we can get a clear field of fire from a point just before the station to the extent of the range. We'll have to build defences for the laser and the power supply is going to be something of a problem. We may have to drill a narrow shaft directly to the pile as well as run a buried cable."

" How close to the station can we get ?" Echlan moved towards the edge of the slope. Felix joined him.

" At a guess I'd say about where the rocket is standing now."

" So far ? Can't you get it closer than that ?"

" Not unless we get too near the edge for safety. An explosive missile, for example, could crumble this entire area and undercut the position so that the whole thing will fall to the ground."

" I see." Echlan was thoughtful. " So it's really a choice between using them for immediate defence or concentrating on missile attack."

" That's about it," agreed Felix. " In a way that's the main trouble with a laser. A mortar could lob shells from strong cover and still remain unexposed but the effective destruction area of its shell is relatively small. The same with anti-missile guns, the delay-space between shells allows the oncoming missile to actually pass between them. The laser is effective from the projector to the target all along the beam. A sychronised cone of them make an almost impenetrable barrier."

Alone, Felix concentrated on what he was supposed to be doing. The area, even though previously selected, still needed on-the-spot surveying because, for example, no one had been able to tell beforehand that the area would be so friable. He frowned as he kicked at the crumbling rock. The site would have to be excavated down to solid stone and levelled. The defences would have to be built and camouflaged and there was always the problem of power-supply and maintenance.

He suddenly found that he was gasping and a little dizzy and realised that he had been standing too long in direct sunlight. Hastily he moved into a patch of shadow sprawling as if solid before a rock. The suit had a crude temperature-lowering device based on the chilling effect of expanding air but its use tended to deplete the air-supply and was more of an emergency measure than anything else.

The control was situated on his chest and he twisted it, feeling relief as a wave of coldness forced its way past his chest and over his face and head. Relaxing he leaned back and let his eyes drift over the edge towards the humped line of distant Tycho. They must be, he realised, almost at the level of the Eyrie. Far below, the rocket ship looked like an expensive toy. Aside from the vessel the terrain looked as it must have always looked for uncounted thousands of years.

Something flashed in the distance.

Felix straightened, eyes narrowed behind the viewport as he searched the area. It had only been a brief twinkle of brilliance and for a moment he doubted whether he had seen anything at all. Then it came again, a sun-bright sparkle as of light reflecting from some bright surface. It came from the far distance between Tycho and the station and, he knew, it could only have been caused by some moving object.

Echlan had seen it too. Before Felix could report, he heard the sergeant's voice.

" Unknown object approaching station on bearing three twenty-five. Distance about five miles."

" Message received," said a woman's voice. " Switch to combat channel."

A figure suddenly stood beside Felix and his helmet rang as the other made contact. It was Echlan, his voice distorted.

" There's a switch just before your chin. Knock it to the right. Got it ?"

Felix found it and threw it with a thrust of his chin.

" Right. What was that for ?"

" Limited radio-silence. Knock it back if there is an emergency. As from now we can talk to each other but you can't talk to control. Only I can do that. If I get killed or hurt then someone else will take over. Don't worry about anything until you're the last man alive."

" You're joking."

" Maybe. I hope so. But that thing out there may not be friendly and we can't afford to take any chances."

Echlan left and Felix was conscious of movement. Suited figures melted into the rock, weapons at the ready. He suddenly felt very vulnerable.

" We should have had a couple of bazookas," said a man grimly. " These pop-guns won't even scratch their paint."

" Shut up !" snapped Echlan. " Use your eyes, not your mouth !"

There was strain in his voice and it was obvious why. If the station should be attacked the defenders wouldn't stand a chance and, if war had broken out on Earth, the station would be a prime target. It could even be the target selected to commence hostilities, for the old conception of a formal declaration of war had been buried long ago.

Minutes dragged and the strain mounted. Felix lay tense, trying to ignore an itching place on his cheek, sweat stinging his eyes. From the distance, riding in a plume of dust, the mysterious vehicle came into sight.

" Hell !" A man was explosive with relief. " It's the Yanks !"

" Hold it !" Echlan was a professional soldier. " We can't be certain of that yet."

" I recognise their runner, Sarge."

" So they could be Yanks, but what of it ? They could still be enemies. We stay alert until we know for certain."

It was a cold, hard philosophy, but the only one possible in the circumstances. For a while longer the tension continued then dissolved as Echlan received word from control.

" All right. The alert is over. It's General Klovis and his party."

" I knew it," said a disgusted voice. " It had to be the Yanks. Trust them to knock the paint off their runner."

" Some mechanic's going to get a rocket when Klovis finds out," said another. " I'd like to be there when he gets it."

The banter continued. Interested in the strange vehicle, Felix rose and, resting his weight on the edge of the crest, leaned forward as it approached the station. It was well-designed, he thought, perfectly adapted to crossing rugged ground at high speed and, aside from the bright patch of alloy where the paint had been scraped, would be almost invisible at any distance.

" If you're finished here, Felix we'll get down," said Echlan. " Have you done all you want to do ?"

" Yes. The rest is up to the technicians."

" Good. Let's get moving then."

Felix stepped forward, the full weight of his body thrusting against his left foot, the other one resting on the edge of the slope.

Even as he moved he felt the support begin to yield and then, with horrifying abruptness, the entire edge fell away.

" Felix !"

For a moment he seemed to hang suspended then he began to fall. He was tilted forward and had a glimpse of a suited figure running towards him before his helmet smashed against the edge. There was a shattering impact and the viewport dissolved into a thousand tiny lines starring from a jagged opening. Air whined from the helmet followed by a spray of blood from the ruptured membranes of his nose.

Then he was falling, bouncing down the steep slope, rolling, blind and terrified to the ground almost a thousand feet below.

nine

The scent was familiar ; he knew who it was without needing to open his eyes.

" Hello, Gloria."

He tried to move and winced at sudden pain. He was, he guessed, in a hospital bed and the smell of hospitals was in the air. He opened his eyes and guessed that he had been asleep or in coma. Or perhaps she had sedated him ; she was good at that."

" Hello, Gloria."

" You said that," she smiled. " Five hours ago."

" I did ? Have you been here all this time ?"

" No. Avril sat beside you. She insisted."

" Where is she now ?"

" Gone. She has her work to do." Gloria took his pulse and nodded in satisfaction. " Good. As far as I can see you are out of shock. Are you ?"

" I don't know." He frowned thoughtfully at the ceiling. " I suppose I must be. Why am I still alive ?"

" Why ?"

" Still a stickler for correct terminology, Doctor ? How then ? How is it that I didn't die when I fell off that cliff ?"

" A combination of fortuitous circumstances commonly known as luck."

" Good luck."

" I didn't say that. Luck can be good or bad depending on the point of view. Yours, from your point of view, happened to be good."

" I see." He smiled. " It seems that I was well-named, Gloria. Cats are popularly supposed to have nine lives, aren't they ?"

" I shouldn't rely on it, Felix," she said solemnly. They both smiled.

" You smashed your helmet," she said. " At the same time loss of air caused a minor nasal haemorrhage—a nose bleed—and the blood pasted itself over most of the viewport and sealed it against further breakage. You rolled down the slope and fell into a patch of dust which broke your fall. You fell face-down so that the dust blocked the vent in the viewport. That, coupled with the blood, effectively saved you from asphyxiation."

" Damage ?"

" Bruises, sprains and shock. The shock has passed, the bruises and sprains are minor. You had better not go outside for a while just yet, but otherwise you are in good working condition."

He nodded and cautiously stretched himself. The earlier pains had vanished, probably medicated away and, aside from a slight stiffness, he felt quite well. Curiously he stared at the woman.

" Tell me," he said, " just what do you think are the chances of anyone living through the kind of accident I've just had ?"

" I don't know. I am not a mathematician."

" Perhaps not, but you must have some idea. Almost none, eh ?"

" Almost. Why ?"

" I am a curious man, Gloria. Friends have told me it's my biggest failing. You, yourself, have told me to encourage it by asking questions. Do I need another reason ?"

" I suppose not. You . . ."

She broke off as the intercom hummed into life. It was a signal-call, he noted, which made her one of the few people to be so summoned.

" Yes ?"

" The Director would like to see you in his office," said the woman in control. " Are you available ?"

" Yes. I will be along in a few minutes." She released the button and stood for a moment, frowning in thought.

" Trouble, Gloria ?"

" What a stupid question !" She came to a decision. " I want you to stay in bed while I've gone. Avril will probably

drop in to see you later so you may as well wait for her. I'll give you something to make you sleep until she arrives."

"More pills, Gloria?"

"Take it." It was small, round and of a vivid blue. "Hurry," she said impatiently. "It will clear up the last vestiges of shock."

He sighed, took the pill and putting it into his mouth made hard work of swallowing.

"Water!"

"Here." She handed him a cup. "Swallowed it? Good. Settle down now and don't get out of bed."

He smiled as she bustled about the ward, letting his eyes close and breathing shallowly as if asleep. He heard her walk towards him and rolled up his eyes. The precaution was unnecessary, she did not lift an eyelid.

Only when he was certain she had gone did he sit up and spit the dissolving pill into his hand.

The ward was small, six beds together with an oxygen apparatus, some cabinets of drugs and instruments and an X-ray machine. A door led, he supposed, to an operating theatre and another opened into a small office containing filing cabinets and medical records.

Aside from himself the ward was empty. Slipping from the bed he crossed to the door, opened it a crack and saw the back of a guard. Softly he closed the panel. Crossing to the other door he opened it and saw, as he had expected, an operating table in the centre of the room. He stood, running his eyes over the appointments of the theatre and wondered if Gloria had personally selected her equipment. If so she had done a superb job. He doubted if better was to be found in even the most modern hospital.

Stepping into the theatre he glanced to his left and saw the other man.

"Seldon!" Felix stared at the face, so familiar from photographs. "Seldon! What the hell are you doing in here?"

"What . . .?" Heavy eyelids opened and revealed eyes of murky brown. "What . . ."

He was, Felix thought, still half-asleep or under the influence of drugs. He was in an odd position, certainly not in a bed but rather as if he sat on a chair. A sheet was wrapped around his

neck and covered the rest. His face, though much thinner, had a healthy colour and he didn't seem to be ill.

"Seldon! Wake up!" Felix gently squeezed the man's cheeks, pursing his mouth so that his lips protruded like those of a gasping fish. It was a means to wake a person without causing shock or alarm, and without knowing more of the man's condition he dared not be too rough.

"What . . . don't do that!" His voice was thin but without weakness. "Who are you?"

"A friend." Felix lowered his voice. "Do you know the sum total of the combination of Sir Joshua's safe?"

"I do." Seldon mentioned it. "Did he send you?"

"Yes." Felix carefully closed the operating theatre's door and returned to the other man. He was conscious of a rising excitement; this man could tell him all he had to know.

The government trusted no one. They had staffed the station with selected personnel but among them they had put one who had orders to send secret reports direct to Whitehall. That man was Seldon. He was the cause of Felix having been sent to the Moon.

"What happened," said Felix. "You haven't sent any reports for over six months and the ones before that showed you were worried about something. What was it?"

"Nothing." Seldon moistened his lips with the tip of his tongue. "Water," he said. "Get me some water. You'll find a cup over by the washing bowl."

The cup was of the type used to give liquids to immobile patients. It had a cover and a spout through which they could drink. Felix filled it and carried it back to Seldon.

"Just a little," he said. "Just enough to wet my lips . . . they get so dry."

"How badly are you hurt?"

"Pretty bad. It was an accident . . . but never mind that now. What is Sir Joshua worried about?"

"Don't you know?" Felix felt a sudden annoyance. "According to you something was going seriously wrong up here. You said that you were worried and suspected enemy agents. Well?"

"I don't know . . . it's hard to remember."

"How do you mean? Have you been drugged? I don't mean medically."

"No, I don't think so."

" Then, damn it, let's get to business ! I'm tired of working in the dark and there isn't time if what you hinted is true. Are there enemy agents in the station ?"

" I thought there might be."

" Who ? Have you any suspicions ?"

" Leaver."

" Leaver. Anyone else ?"

" I don't know. I . . . Can I have another drink ?"

Felix restrained his impatience as he moistened the other's mouth. He was obviously ill, perhaps seriously so even if he didn't look it, and a little vagueness was to be expected.

" Try and think," he urged. " You know how serious this is. You reported that you were unhappy at the way things were going at the station. What did you mean by that ?"

" Odd things." Seldon's eyes were clear now. " You know how it is when you sense that something isn't quite as it should be but just can't put your finger on it. The Eyrie for example, why go to all that trouble to provide a view ?"

" And ?"

" The breakdown of demarkation among the personnel."

" And ?"

" I don't know. A lot of little things. A mental attitude, perhaps. It made me uneasy."

" Are you still uneasy ?"

" No."

" Why not ?"

" How can I answer that ? I just don't feel concerned anymore." Oddly the man laughed, it had a peculiarly empty sound. Felix bit his lip, this was getting him nowhere.

" Listen," he said urgently. " I know that you've been badly hurt but please try and concentrate. We may not have another chance to talk alone. Have you any reason to suspect that there is any large-scale subversion here ?"

" How could there be ?"

" I'm asking the questions !"

" I don't know. At one time I think I feared that as a possibility, but I simply couldn't see how it could come about. I mean, there was no propaganda, no insidious incentive to betray our trust."

" Yet you suspected it ?"

" At one time, yes."

" But you were never able to obtain proof ?"

" No."

" I see." Felix reverted to an earlier statement. " You said that you don't feel concerned about it any more. Do you mean that you don't give a damn what happens to the station ?"

" Of course not. I mean that it doesn't worry me now as it did." Seldon laughed again. " In fact very few things worry me now. Perhaps because I am powerless to do anything about it, no matter what may happen." He paused. " I've not been very much help to you, have I ?"

" No." Felix was honest.

" I'm sorry, but you must remember that, in my position, I had to suspect everything. It wasn't for me to arrive at a conclusion but only to report the facts as I saw them and add a general impression. I was disturbed and said so. That impression could have been quite wrong."

" I don't think it was," said Felix. " Is that all you can tell me ?"

" I'm afraid so. You must realise that I have not been mobile for some time now. You probably have a clearer picture of the establishment than I have and there is always the possibility that I was too prone to caution. Even so, that was hardly a fault."

Seldon hadn't been at fault, thought Felix bleakly. His position had been that of a watchman in a munitions factory who suspects the presence of matches and had sent for an inspector to find them before the explosion. Felix was the inspector.

" I'm going to have a look round," he told Seldon. " Is there anything you want ?"

" A sip of water, please."

Felix moistened his lips, wondering why the man didn't drink properly. He was a little curious about Seldon's injuries. He seemed alert enough, his eyes were bright and his skin clear, but he couldn't even move his head let alone any other part of his body.

" Thank you."

" I'll leave you now." Felix returned the cup as he had found it. " There is no need to tell you that this talk was confidential. I would rather no one knew that I have seen you."

" I understand."

Gloria was a neat woman and kept her office as neat as herself. Her records were each filed in its correct place and told

her what she or any other doctor would want to know about the personnel of the station. Felix was not a doctor even though he knew quite a lot about medicine, but he did know something of women. He smiled as an open drawer revealed a small bust of Macdonald. It had been carved from some soft stone, probably a fragment from one of the great ' rays ' which streamed from Tycho, and it was an extremely good likeness.

" So," he said softly to himself as he looked at it. " Our precise lady sawbones is a true woman at heart after all."

He replaced the bust and continued his search, not knowing just what he was looking for but knowing that it would register if he found it. He leafed through official papers, directives from Whitehall, files, records and a mass of medical literature of an obviously American origin. That, he assumed, had come from the American base. He carefully read several sheets of handwriting and found they were poetry and very good poetry indeed. Finally he picked up the hospital casualty book.

It was, he found, a very comprehensive record. It dated from the first days of the establishment to the present time and he smiled at the last entry, his own.

Dec 13th. 22.10 hrs. 1989. Larsen, Felix. Fall from outside cliff approx 1,000ft Viewport of helmet shattered at commencement of fall. Minor injuries.

Terse, he thought, a bald statement which was probably expanded in the correct file with what medication she had seen fit to give him. He looked at an earlier entry.

Dec 10th. 02.34 hrs. Maynard, Colin. Attempted suicide. Cartridge misfired. Psychic shock.

So she had guessed or Maynard had told her, it made no difference. But, from what he had gathered from Echlan, Maynard had returned to duty, the incident was closed and the whole thing remained an official mystery. In that case either Gloria had not bothered to report the incident to either Crombie or Macdonald or . . .

He stood very still, the book in his hands, the peculiar impression that he hovered on the verge of an important discovery beating in his mind.

Or she had reported it and neither of them had considered it to be important enough to worry about. And she must have reported it. The records must be subject to examination and, if she had wanted to cover the incident then why record it at all?

Felix sighed, his eyes thoughtful. No military commander in his experience would dare to overlook a thing like the attempted suicide of one of his men. No establishment dealing in wholesale death would dare to allow a psychotic personality with suicidal tendencies to run loose. Not when, driven by the death wish, he could destroy himself and the entire installation with him. Such a thing simply couldn't happen when once it was brought to the notice of the authorities.

Not unless it was of so common an occurrence that it was regarded as normal behaviour.

Hastily he began to riffle through the book then snapped it shut at the sound of voices from beyond the guarded door. Quickly he replaced it, took a fast look around the office to make certain that everything was as he had found it, and reached the bed just as the door began to swing open. Eyes closed, breathing shallow, he simulated sleep as footsteps crossed the room towards him.

A hand touched his forehead and gently stroked his hair. It was very soft, very cool, and very feminine. It didn't belong to Gloria.

" Poor Felix." Avril's voice held a tone he hadn't heard before. Now there was none of her former brashness ; her defence mechanism against hurt. She was all woman, mother and comforter, wife and friend. " Why do I have to love you so much ?"

He sighed and slowly opened his eyes, smiling up into her face poised above his own.

" Hello, Angel."

" You're not dead, silly."

" Does that make a difference ?"

It was natural to kiss but he was startled by the sharp emotion the touch of her lips brought to sudden life. He covered it with an artificial yawn and sat up in the bed.

" Have you been here long ?"

" Guess ?"

" An hour ?" He shook his head. " No, I can't guess. Have you ?"

" No."

He yawned again and rubbed his eyes, wondering just how strong that blue pill had been. Not very strong, probably, Gloria had known that Avril was coming for him, but he had to play it safe.

" Damn that woman and her pills ! I feel worn out."

" She means well."

" Maybe, but as far as I'm concerned she's just a cold-blooded pill-pusher with a fluoroscope for a heart." He looked down at his near-nakedness. " This is beginning to get a habit. Now where did she put my coverall ?"

Avril found it hanging in a cupboard and held it while he laved his face and neck at the sink. He made no effort to be curious about what was behind the closed door and hoped that he was staying in character.

" Felix !" Avril looked at him, an odd expression in her eyes.

" Yes ?"

" Felix, when you were falling, from that cliff, I mean, what did you think about ?"

" Think ?" He frowned, surprised at her question, then shrugged. " I can't remember. I was as scared as hell, I know that."

" Nothing else ?"

" Yes," he said slowly. " There was, now I come to think about it. I felt anger and regret. Anger at having been so foolish as to stand so near the edge and regret at . . ."

". . . at lost opportunities ?"

"I can't remember. Are we going to eat or do I have to stay here until Gloria returns ?"

" She's busy at the moment. I suppose you can leave now and we can eat together." She slipped her arm through his. " Did you, Felix ?"

" Did I what ?"

" Regret lost opportunities ?"

" Not exactly. I regretted not having stayed on Earth when I had the chance."

He lied and he hoped she didn't know it. He had suffered regret as he fell and he had thought of a particular person with reference to that emotion. He had thought of Avril and he knew why.

It was a pity that he couldn't trust her but he couldn't trust her or anyone now. Especially not now. Not since he had learned that Seldon was useless and that he was totally on his own.

ten

" Well, folks !" General Klovis raised his glass. " Here's to our continued understanding !"

Ten people drank the toast with various degrees of appreciation. Gloria made a face as she swallowed the spirit and Macdonald smiled at her.

" Just go through the motions," he whispered. " You don't have to drink the stuff."

" I know, but I need it. How much longer is this going on?"

" Not too long, I hope." He hesitated. " Is everything all right ?"

" Yes."

" Good. Be gracious now, we have to be polite."

Lord Severn needed no such urging. He smiled as he set down his glass. " Surely, General, there is no fear that we shall ever be other than the best of friends ?" He neither waited for nor expected an answer. " Rather good bourbon this."

" Each man to his taste," said Macdonald evenly. He sipped at his glass. " Imported, General ?"

" Good grief, no !" Klovis chuckled as he refilled the glasses from the plastic bottle. " We aren't that rich, Sir Ian. No. We have an old moonshiner from Kentucky at the base." He raised his glass for a second toast. " Here's to closer co-operation !"

" Agreed. But closer co-operation would mean that we are no longer partners."

" Now I don't get that." Klovis gestured towards the members of the Commission. " I feel, and I think that I'm not alone, that we could be a great deal closer than we are. Defence, for one thing. I mean no insult, Director, but I could take this base any time I wanted. And if I could do it, then so could the Reds."

"I see." Macdonald set down his glass. "Major Crombie!"

" Yes, Sir Ian."

" If we were attacked, by any foreign force, what would you do ?"

" Destroy the station."

" Utterly ?"

" To the last man and woman." Crombie's eyes were as hard as Macdonald's. The Director smiled.

" You see, General Klovis ? If any strong force tried to capture this station they would win only a semi-molten patch in the ground." Macdonald raised his glass. " Now, with your permission, General Klovis, I would like to propose a toast."

" Sure. Go right ahead."

" To freedom—in the truest sense of the word !"

They drank, Klovis admiring the Director's spirit and feeling a little sorry for him. He had made his point but only just.

Klovis found it all very interesting. It had been a stroke of luck finding the visitors at the station and it hadn't been difficult to figure just why they were there. Watts had talked and so had Meeson, business was international and defence was so integrated that neither of them had wanted to risk being thought unco-operative. Macdonald, though he might not know it, was way out on a limb.

It was time to drop his bombshell.

" I don't believe it !" Crombie was emphatic. " It simply isn't possible !"

" It's a fact." Rasch spread out his graphs and figures. " These can't lie, Major. I tell you that someone in this station is sending out messages and we can guess to whom !"

It had shaken them, Klovis could see that. Unconsciously he unwrapped a cigar, stuck it in his mouth and then remembered that there was no smoking on the station. He sucked at the unlit cylinder as he tried to read their faces.

He had been cautious. Only the Major, Sir Ian, General Watts and himself together with Rasch were in the inner room. The rest of the Commission together with the doctor had been left outside. For security reasons, if for no other, this thing had to be classified as restricted information. But Watts, he guessed, would tell Lord Severn and that would mean a tightening of the screw.

" I don't like to keep playing the same tune, Sir Ian," he said smoothly, " but it's a matter of manpower. You simply can't watch everyone all the time and a spy wouldn't have a hard job escaping discovery, especially if he's using some new gadget which doesn't register on your instruments."

" If there is a spy. Personally I doubt that very much."

" Do you doubt Rasch's figures ?"

" Yes."

" Come again, Sir Ian ?"

" For a long time now your government has wanted control of this station. This could be a means of bringing pressure to bear. If there is a spy here, as you say, then obviously he must be caught. You claim that we cannot clean our own house. I disagree."

" The facts prove otherwise, Sir Ian." He was, thought Klovis, a fighting devil and he admired him for it, but he was waging a losing battle.

" No, General Klovis, they do not. These figures," Macdonald flipped the papers with the tip of a finger, " what do they prove ? As far as I am concerned they prove nothing at all. You claim to have received them and taken bearings which lead to this base. Do I have to remind you that, on the Moon, radio operates on line-of-sight ? How, then, could you have obtained bearings ?"

" Well, Rasch ?" Klovis turned to the captain. Macdonald was smart, he hadn't thought of that. His eyes warned the captain that he had better have a good explanation.

" They are not signals on the electromagnetic spectrum," said Rasch. " They obviously do not operate under the same restrictions."

" A neat explanation." Macdonald glanced at General Watts then back to Rasch. " If they are not radio signals then how do you know they are messages ?"

" I've explained that."

" Yes, so you have, if your explanation is the correct one. But couldn't they be signals emanating from the sun ? Even from Earth ? A freak transmission, perhaps ?"

" No."

" You seem very confident ?"

" I am." Rasch, Klovis saw, was getting rattled. " Why do you refuse to accept the obvious ?"

" Is it obvious ?" Macdonald shrugged. " General Watts ? Is it so obvious to you ?"

" I'm not a scientist," said the General slowly, " but I can see your point, Sir Ian. I can take it that you monitor the station ?"

" Constantly."

" Spot searches ?"

" At regular intervals." Crombie joined in the argument. " Really, General Watts, this accusation is ridiculously far-fetched."

" Perhaps, Major, but we can take no chances." Watts Klovis could see, was undecided. As a visitor he had no real power in the station and he hesitated to give Macdonald an order which could result in an outright refusal. The Director broke the impasse.

" There is a simple way out of all this," he said evenly. " Your detecting instrument, Captain Rasch, is portable and . . ."

" I didn't say that, Sir Ian," said Rasch and Klovis inwardly cursed the man for a fool. Macdonald looked surprised.

" But you took bearings ! You could only have done that by taking readings from several widely separated points. You had to carry your detectors so they must be portable."

" Yes . . . I suppose they are."

" Do you have one in the runner ?"

" Yes . . . that is, no. I . . ."

" We have one," sighed Klovis. Rasch would never make a diplomat or anything else, he was too transparent.

" Good." Macdonald looked pleased and, thought Klovis sourly, he had reason to be. " Then the whole thing is simple. You loan us your detector and, if we register any overt signalling, we can take steps to discover who is responsible." He smiled at the discomfited Klovis. " So easy when you put your mind to it, isn't it General ?"

" Yeah. Yeah, I guess it is."

" Agreed, General Watts ?"

" It seems an excellent idea to me, Sir Ian." Watts was expansive at having escaped the necessity of making an awkward decision. " That's settled then, eh, Klovis ?"

He had no choice but to agree.

eleven

The rat was a prime, healthy specimen of the tame, white variety so beloved by schoolboys and so detested by fond, female parents. Ottoway held it in gloved hands, stroking the short fur as he held it in plain view.

" Gentlemen, please regard this animal."

The members of the Commission stirred on their chairs and Macdonald hoped the bio-physicist wasn't going to act the fool. They wanted a demonstration, not a lecture, but there was nothing he could do but hope that Ottoway would get the unpleasant business over as quickly as he could.

" Rats," said Ottoway evenly, " are, biologically speaking, very much like a man. They are relatively intelligent, relatively small and very easy to breed. They make ideal laboratory specimens. Remember that what affects a rat will affect a man. Think of this animal as being a man."

He nodded to Jeff who came forward with a plastic box. Ottoway put the rat in the box and closed the lid, watching as the animal raced around the enclosure, sharp nose twitching at the transparent barrier.

" I would like to talk about biological warfare for a moment," continued Ottoway. He smiled at the Director. " Don't be afraid that I am going to preach, that isn't my job, but it would help if you understood the problem from the ground up, so to speak. Now, as you all know, plagues like smallpox, typhoid, cholera and the bubonic plague of the Middle Ages are extremely virulent but they are not total in their destruction-potential. Some affected people recover. Some simply do no succumb and, of course, vaccines and innoculations can now give immunity."

" I think we are all aware of that, Ottoway," said General Watts impatiently.

" I am pleased to hear it, General." Ottoway remained bland. " But if I may continue—?"

" Go on," said Connor. " I find this extremely interesting."

" Thank you." Ottoway paused as if waiting for further comments then plunged ahead.

" I don't want to bore you, gentlemen, so I will summarise. A military biological weapon must have certain capabilities. It must remain virulent over long periods of storage. It must be easily disseminated and quickly propagated. The death-rate of victims should be one hundred per cent and there should be no obvious antibiotic. By this I mean that the weapon itself should not serve to fashion its own vaccine as, for example, in the case of smallpox."

" But there surely must be some form of protection," said Connor. " Otherwise it would be a double-edged weapon. We would suffer as much as the enemy."

" Exactly." Ottoway rested his hand on the case, the movement disturbing the rat who froze in one corner, its tiny ruby eyes reflecting the lights with startling brilliance.

" That has always been a major problem, Mr. Connor, and an obvious one. We have developed virus diseases against

which the bubonic plagues are as relatively harmless as a common cold—but once released they will devastate both sides. Also, by their very nature, they cannot be guaranteed one hundred per cent fatal or effective."

Connor nodded, deep lines of thought creasing his forehead, and Macdonald wondered if he were calculating the effect of such a holocaust on the financial system of the capitalist countries. He shrugged, knowing that he was possibly being unfair, and listened to what Ottoway was saying.

". . . nerve gases," said the bio-physicist. "They are effective and quite lethal but they are not self-propagating. The problem then, as we saw it, was to develop something of a similar nature but which would contain all the desired attributes of the ideal weapon. We have succeeded."

He was, thought Macdonald, quite a showman when he set himself out to be.

There was an inlet valve on the side of the case in which the rat crouched in terrified immobility. Jeff opened a cabinet, took out a small container and passed it to Ottoway. He poised it in his hand.

"The contents of this vial," he said with unconscious dramatic effect, "if released in the air of this room, would kill every living thing in the station within five minutes."

He screwed it to the inlet valve of the case and rested his fingers on the release screw.

"The virus it contains was one developed from nucleic acids and is quite artificial. It does not occur in nature. It is anaerobic, that is it can live without free oxygen, and has still remained virulent after being subjected to immersion in liquid helium and boiled in pressurised steam. It fulfils all the requirements of the perfect biological weapon. Now watch as I show you how it works."

Ottoway twisted the screw and the members of the Commission tensed, leaning forward on their chairs. Macdonald did not tense, he had seen this before, but he felt a little sick. It was never pleasant to see a helpless creature die.

A faint spray came from the vial, immediately dissipating into the air of the case. For a few seconds nothing happened and then, quite suddenly, the rat slumped. It was not dead, the eyes still shone with life, but it looked as if paralysed. The nose twitched once, the tail stirred a little and then fell like a limp piece of string. Suddenly the light went out from the tiny ruby eyes.

" Fifteen seconds," said Ottoway. " I know that you didn't time it, gentlemen, but you can take my word for it. A man would take little longer."

" Incredible !" Connor was, Macdonald noticed, sweating and his eyes held a horrified expression. " Did it suffer ?"

" Of course it didn't." Prentice was quick to soothe the other's fears. " It just fell asleep. Isn't that right, Ottoway?"

" Not exactly. The virus attacked the acetylchline in the creature's body." Ottoway looked down at the case. " To be able to move, your brain has to send a message along the nerves to the appropriate muscles. The nerves are not continuous threads of tissue. They are, if you like, more like a row of bricks, each one almost, but not quite, touching the other. Acetylchline is the stuff between the segments of nervous tissue that enables the electrical stimulus to progress over the minute gaps. Ordinary nerve gases affect this message-carrying capacity to some extent but the virus you have just seen at work utterly destroys it.

" A person attacked by the virus becomes paralysed, a helpless brain locked in unresponsive flesh. For a short while life, that is consciousness, will continue and then death provides a welcome relief. There is no cure, no natural resistance, no hope of survival once attacked. The death-rate is one hundred per cent. Our calculations have shown that one single container of the virus, released in any large town, will totally destroy every inhabitant of that town within three hours. By selected dissemination it is possible to literally wipe out all life, and I mean all life, animal as well as human, from the entire globe within three days."

" I don't believe it !" General Watts was incredulous. Ottoway shrugged.

" It's a fact, General. When the very atmosphere becomes contaminated and every victim is a source of continual infection, then the end is inevitable. The virus will only become dormant when there is nothing on which it can breed."

" But—"

" Why are you so incredulous ?" Ottoway was impatient. " After all, the fallout from present atomic weapons can do the job just as thoroughly as this virus and with exactly the same end-result. Both will lead to the utter annihilation of every living thing on earth."

" But not if we have an antibiotic," said Prentice shrewdly.

Ottoway looked at the Director.

" We have protection ?" Prentice was sharp. Macdonald slowly shook his head.

" No," he said grimly. " That is why the virus must never leave this station."

They did not smoke at the station. Economics, not ethics had dictated the custom ; tobacco was an unessential luxury and the air pollution was something to be avoided when slender resources were already strained to the limit, but the members of the Commission were beyond ethical consideration.

Even so, Macdonald had insisted that they restrict their indulgence to a special room he had placed at their disposal for private discussion and relaxation.

" Well, gentlemen." Lord Severn carefully lit a cigar, noting with regret that it was the last but one of the few which weight-limitations had permitted him to carry in his personal baggage. " I have no desire to hurry you, of course, but we can hardly stay here indefinitely. If you are all quite certain that you have satisfied yourselves . . .?"

He let the question hang in the air, busy with his Havana, too subtle to commit himself to any course of action until he knew the direction of the popular wind."

" I've seen enough." General Watts was terse and to the point."

" Me too." Meeson echoed the General and Prentice made a murmur of agreement. Connor hesitated.

" Well," he said. " I'd like to be sure on one or two points."

" Such as ?" Prentice wanted to get back to his firm and suspected that Connor didn't share his reasons for haste. His tone betrayed his impatience and Connor bridled. Lord Severn noticed it and smoothly the old diplomat healed the breach.

" We are here to do a task of investigation for Her Majesty's Government," he said silkily. " It is our duty to carry out our Commission as best we may. However, I feel that we should try to avoid putting any extra burden on the Director. Do you agree, Connor ?"

Put like that Connor had no choice. If he insisted then he would be a nuisance to the Director and to the rest of the Commission. He decided not to be a nuisance. Lord Severn smiled his appreciation.

" Good. Now, perhaps, if I may make a suggestion ?"

Their agreement was unanimous.

" Well, I was thinking that we could spend the rest of our time here in arriving at some informal agreement as to our findings." His smile was bland. " The Prime Minister, I know for a fact, would appreciate an early report."

" I know what is obvious enough," snapped General Watts. " The defences of this place are ludicrous. Any attempt at defence would be futile. Crombie's a good man but you know what these die-hards are. In this day and age you've got to face facts and forget sentimental nonsense. Klovis had a good point when he said that we needed his help, not when we are attacked, but here waiting for any attack to come."

" Wouldn't that mean the station becoming just another part of the American defence zone ?" Connor was thoughtful. " I don't think that I wholly agree with that idea."

" Would you rather the Reds get their hands on what you've seen in action ?" Watts gestured in the general direction of the laboratories. " You saw what it did to that rat. Do you want to see the same thing happen to the Western world ?"

" Of course not. But Crombie promised that he would destroy the station rather than let that happen."

" Yes—if he could." The General was grim. " But suppose he didn't get the chance ? The station could be sabotaged, enemy agents spring a surprise attack, anything. No, I don't think we should run any unessential risk."

" Sir Ian would never permit the Americans to establish a garrison here," said Meeson thoughtfully.

" Then Sir Ian would have to be replaced !"

" Is that fair ?"

" Gentlemen !" Lord Severn gestured with his cigar. " Let us be calm about this. Sir Ian has been here for over seven years and that is a long time for any man to be away from home. It would be a kindness to relieve him of such responsibility. There would be rewards, a peerage certainly, perhaps even a place in the diplomatic corps. Do not let your judgment be influenced by the thought of any disgrace. Sir Ian has nothing to fear on that score."

" Maybe not." Watts irritably crushed out his cigarette. He was in a dilemma. Klovis' suspicion of a spy operating within the station was a forceful argument but one he couldn't use. While he sat glowering at the smouldering butt Prentice came to his assistance.

" What Sir Ian wants and what he doesn't want is beside the point," he said primly. " Surely it is the government which makes decisions on this level. I agree with General Watts. I

think the station should be under American protection. If this is difficult under the present Director then he should be replaced by a man with a more co-operative attitude."

" Could you . . ." Lord Severn broke off with a frown as the intercom hummed a signal. " Confound those boxes !" He waited impatiently until the signal cut into silence. "Could you finalise that, Prentice ?"

" Certainly, Lord Severn. I think the Director should be replaced and I shall so recommend."

" Thank you. Meeson ?"

" I am against the suggestion."

" I see. General Watts, you, I take it, are in agreement. Connor ?"

" I suppose it's for the best."

" Yes, I think that it is." Now that he knew the will of the majority Lord Severn had no hesitation. " I must admit that my feelings in the matter are the same. It is no secret that, for some time now, the government has been embarrassed by this problem. A full-scale defence programme of the station at this time would be a heavy burden on the expenditure and the opposition would be quick to make capital of the matter. On the other hand it is essential that we show our implicit trust and confidence in our allies and . . ."

He broke off as an attention signal hummed from the intercom.

" Really. This is too much !"

Impatiently he waited for the sound to cease.

The second signal was for Macdonald. Crombie turned to him as he entered control, the Major was strangely tense.

" It's from the Americans," he said. " They called some time back and wanted to speak to Klovis, do you remember ?"

" Yes, but he'd left hours earlier and should have been back by then."

" That's what I told them." Crombie made a vague gesture. " Apparently he could have called them via the satellite if he had run into trouble, a breakdown or anything. When he didn't get back on time they grew worried and sent out a search party."

" So ?"

" They found his runner." Crombie gnawed at his lip. " It was tilted on the edge of a crater. It must have rolled, God know's how, and the shell was ruptured. Klovis, Rasch and the driver were inside. They must have died instantly."

twelve

Felix hefted his pick, drove it into rock with a surge of shoulder and back muscles, jerked it free with a shower of stone and paused to wipe the sweat from his forehead.

"If this is recreation," he said feelingly, "then give me the salt mines."

"You're joking." His companion, a stocky West Indian, grinned as he picked up a boulder that would have weighed half a ton back on his native island. "Who wants salt?"

"I do." Felix looked at his streaming palm. "The way I'm sweating I'll be suffering from cramp before I know it." He wasn't serious and the others of the working party knew it. But he was, to his surprise, in poor physical condition as aching muscles and quick fatigue had shown.

"Man," said the Jamaican, "you're lucky. Back home you'd pay good money for this kind of exercise. There's nothing like it to get rid of fat and build muscle. My father worked with construction gangs all his life and he could lift his own weight above his head until the day he died."

"I bet he loved it," said Felix drily. "The work, I mean."

"He hated it," admitted Toni. "But that was because he had to do it from necessity, not choice. Work is only work when you have to do it. If you do it from choice then it is fun." He slammed home his pick and leaned against the rock face. "Heard the news?"

"About the Yanks?"

"That's right." Toni shook his head. "A bad thing, that. I was playing dice with the driver just before they left. He lost all his money and was he mad!"

"About losing?"

"A little but it was more than that. His Captain wouldn't let him eat with us, afraid of him mixing with the women, I suppose." He grew thoughtful. "You know, I've wondered if that could have had anything to do with what happened. It doesn't pay to get careless outside and a man in anger isn't always as careful as he could be. That driver was really burning."

"It was his life too, don't forget."

"Sure, but haven't you ever been in a temper? A real temper, I mean. Men do odd things when they're in that state. I knew a student once, a quiet chap to look at him. He didn't

make the finals and something broke inside. He offered to drive one of the professors home and went smack into a bus coming the other way. He killed the professor, himself too, but I bet he didn't worry about that. He just wanted revenge."

It was possible—Felix knew enough of the workings of the human brain to know that—and it made sense. Better sense than the rumours of sabotage which had circulated around the station. Three lives wasted because of a man's bad temper !

Irritably he snatched up his pick and slammed it into the rock. Stone flew as he vented his anger at the stupidity of the human race on the uncaring mountain, then he staggered as his foot trod on a loose shard, the pick glancing from the rock face, swinging wildly towards the man at his side.

" Steady !" Toni gripped his arm. " There's no sense in overdoing it. We don't have to dig our way through the mountain."

" What are we doing, anyway ?"

" Extending the living quarters, not that it matters. We do it for exercise, remember ?"

Felix nodded, still feeling the cold touch of fear that had gripped him when the pick had swung towards the other. It had been sheer chance that Toni had moved at that exact moment. If he hadn't the pick would have split his skull.

" I've had enough." He flung down the tool. " I need a shower and the biggest synthetic steak the station can produce. Is it all right if I quit now ?"

" Sure." Toni winked. " Avril's on kitchen duty so I guess you'll get your steak. Maybe she could find one for me too, eh ?"

His rich, understanding laugh rolled from the workings as Felix left the chamber.

He had his shower and steak and then wandered over the station feeling at a loss. He felt tense and irritable like a man who has tackled too big a problem and isn't certain just how to start. Felix had never been trained in counter-espionage, his field was the far more subtle workings of the human mind, and while he could thread his way through a maze of complex motivations, yet he lacked the hunter-instinct which was essential to those seeking human quarry.

If only Seldon had been able to help.

That, he realised, was the trouble. Subconsciously he had been relying on the other man, seeing in himself an impartial observer who would correlate the data supplied by the agent. But Seldon was a helpless invalid, his information vague and out of date. If Felix was to discover what was wrong with the station he had to do it on his own.

And there was something wrong.

He had sensed it in a dozen little ways. Small things in themselves but adding up to one big question mark. It wasn't anything as clear-cut as sabotage and it wasn't the instinctive secrecy of those who suspect a spy in their midst. It was, rather, an attitude of mind and all the more vague because of that.

He paused before one of the doors, not surprised when it swung open. Jeff Carter stepped through the portal.

" Felix !" His smile was genuine. " Long time no see."

" I've been busy," explained Felix. " Working outside and the rest of it. How are things with the lab ?"

" Abic ?" Jeff shrugged. " Nothing new, but then what did you expect ? Scientific discoveries take time." He began to laugh. " Did you hear about Bob Howard's new job ?"

" No ?"

" You didn't ?" Jeff hesitated, then came to a decision. " I suppose the Yanks want it kept secret but you're in the same line, so what's the difference ? Anyway, you can't keep things quiet in the station."

That, thought Felix sourly, was nothing but the truth.

" They've dreamed up a detector, or at least Rasch and his staff did." Jeff sobered. " Bad thing, that accident, I liked Klovis."

Felix waited.

" Anyway," Jeff continued, " Klovis thought that someone in the station was signalling outside. So he saw Sir Ian, and Rasch trained Bob how to use his gadget. It's a neat device, I'll give it that, but they got hold of the wrong end of the stick when they thought we had a spy in here."

He looked up as the intercom began to call his name. He was wanted in the electronics laboratory. He frowned.

" The trouble with Bob is that he's too impatient," said Jeff. " Tell you what, Felix, why not come along with me ? You'll be interested."

Felix doubted it but he had no choice, not if he was to stay in his assumed character. And it would be a good idea to learn as much as he could about everything he could.

Bob looked up as they entered his domain. He sat at a table, a complex apparatus before him, the only part of which Felix recognised was a stylo tracing a line on graph paper.

" Hi, Jeff ! Felix !"

" What's the hurry," said Jeff. " Did you have to page me twice ?"

" I want to clear up something so that I can do some real work," said Bob. He gestured towards the apparatus. "What do you think of Rasch's detector ?" he said to Felix.

" It looks rough."

" Bread-board assemblies usually do," said Bob drily. " What do you make of it ?"

It was something that could have been dreamed up by Heath Robinson, a conglomeration of parts which, to Felix, had neither reason nor purpose. He recognised a coil, a vernier dial, a permanent magnet and what could only be an amplifier. Two small nicad batteries obviously provided power. Without any real knowledge he could only bluff.

" What's it supposed to do ?"

" According to Rasch it detects sentient life, among other things." Bob leaned forward and threw a small switch. The roll of graph paper began to unwind, the stylo tracing a thin, blue line. The graph paper, Felix noted, was time-marked.

" Interesting."

" It's more than that." Bob pointed to some of the parts. " Two transistors, a quartz crystal, a sheet of iron and another of copper. Add the magnet, coil and dial and that's the lot. The amplifier is standard. Well ?"

He was waiting, Felix knew, for his ' professional ' opinion.

" There's the connecting wires, of course." He bent over the machine and then remembered where he had seen something like it once before. It had been at an exhibition of inexplicable phenomena, presented more as a scientific joke than for any serious purpose, and among the exhibits had been what were known as psionic machines.

" It shouldn't work," he said firmly. " The parts make no sense taken separately but, if it does something, then it must be because of their relationship with one another. It does work?"

" It works," said Bob disgustedly. " It shouldn't but it does. At least it registers something. Rasch claimed that it detected signals similar to human thought but much stronger and far

more variable." He glanced at Jeff. " That's why I wanted to see you."

" How can I help ?"

" Rasch didn't know what we know. He received signals far too strong to have been emitted by a human mind and, naturally, suspected the worst. But I don't think we have a mysterious spy lurking in the station sending out our secrets by means of a superior form of radio. I've been checking this thing and if those signals make any sense then the spy, if there is one, is using a code that bears no relation to any form of communication that I've ever heard of."

" Can you be certain of that ?" Felix was interested. Bob nodded.

" Yes. I . . ." He broke off as the intercom hummed into life.

" Attention all personnel ! The Royal Commission is about to leave. Take-off will be relayed to all screens."

" At last !" Bob rose and crossed to a screen. It flared to life as he turned a switch and he grinned at Felix's expression.

" What's the use of having an electronics laboratory if you don't make use of it ? We can watch in comfort from here."

It came, Felix suspected, under the heading of entertainment and he admired the Director for his foresight in his practice of keeping the station informed of all events which had the slightest effect on their welfare. Knowledge killed rumour and, with recreation facilities limited, it was wise to take every advantage of anything to break the monotony. He guessed that every landing and take-off was so televised.

" They're taking their time," said Jeff as the screen showed only the bare terrain and the waiting rocket. " Do we have to look at this ?"

" Why not ?" Bob was casual. " It's not every day we get the chance to wave a high-priced bunch of baskets goodbye."

" To hell with them !" Jeff was savage. Felix changed the subject.

" You were talking about the signals," he reminded Bob. " Why are you so certain they aren't a message ?"

" Any signal which carries a message must have some form of repetition no matter how random the pattern may appear. You can take a message, scramble it, add irrelevancies, increase background noise and turn it this way to Sunday but, buried in

the mess, you still have a message. You may not know what that message is but you can recognise it—especially if it falls into the field of human communication."

He gestured to the slowly revolving roll of graph paper.

" This has no repetition at all. It's too variable both in frequency and intensity. I've been running it since Rasch left, far longer than necessary to establish any sort of pattern, and there just isn't one to establish."

" Have you tried acceleration ? Resonance ? Reverse amplification ?"

" Naturally." Bob sounded surprised at the question.

" Sorry," Felix apologised. " I shouldn't try to teach you your job.

" No, you shouldn't."

There was a quiet irony in the other's tone and Felix wondered just how he had betrayed himself. Not that it mattered too much, he had never claimed to be an expert, but it was annoying.

" Does the Major know about this ?"

" Not yet. I wanted to check with Jeff before I broke the good news. Anyway, he's too busy seeing off the Commission." Bob glanced at the screen. " There they go."

Stark in the external sunlight the crawler lumbered like a primeval monster towards the slender shaft of the rocket ship.

" Ten minutes and they'll be heading for home." Jeff made a harsh sound deep in his throat. " Why the hell couldn't they have stayed there in the first place ?"

" I take it that you don't like our late visitors ?"

" I hate their guts !" Jeff glared at Felix as if he included him with the Commission. " Penny-pinching politicians without the sense to see that they're cutting their own throats. That would be fine but the swines intend to cut ours at the same time. It's pompous, big-mouthed fools like those who have put the world in the state it's in. And you ask if I like them !"

He snorted, then shook himself like a dog, a symbolical shedding of his rage.

" What did you want to check with me, Bob ?"

" About these signals. Any ideas ?"

" I have one." Felix thrust himself into the conversation. " What about Abic ?"

" Abic ?" Bob looked blank, Jeff thoughtful.

" It could be," he mused. " Yes, it probably is. If those signals are emitted from a brain, then that could be the answer. Big signals, big brain, and Abic is the biggest thing in cortexes known. It makes sense, Bob."

" The obvious always does," said Bob ruefully, " when it's shoved in your face, that is. We'll have to check it out, though."

" I'd like to help on that." Felix shrugged at their expressions. " My work's finished outside and there's nothing I can do until my equipment arrives. I'd like to keep busy."

" Sure . . ." Bob broke off as he looked at the screen. " Here she goes !"

It was always a fine sight, better in the airlessness of space when the clear, sharp flame of the rockets was undiffused by atmosphere. For a moment the rocket hung, the base wreathed in flame then, slowly at first but with rapidly mounting velocity, it rose from the moon. The cameras followed its flight.

" Happy landings," breathed Bob.

" They'll make it in one piece," grumbled Jeff. " If it wasn't for the fact I like Star I'd wish they would break their necks."

The ship had vanished from sight now, only the eye-bright exhaust showing stark against the night of space. Suddenly the spot of light grew, expanding until it almost filled the screen with an unbearable brilliance.

They all knew what it meant.

The rocket, and all it contained, had been utterly destroyed.

To be concluded

Guest Editorial continued

some of the pulsating life creep back into our favourite magazines again.

But, and it's a mighty big *but*, if science fiction is after a literary future it can never be found within the specialist magazines. There may be hope in the future, but for the moment, let's face it—the majority of stories, whether as a result of editorial influence or just because the writers haven't been taught to write any other way, follow a form of writing along time-worn trails of plot and repetitious invention, primarily as a means of light intellectual entertainment. As serious social criticism it doesn't come within laughing distance of the writers Baxter has already cited, and it is so self-consciously smart that it has forgotten how small is the pond it is now drowning in.

One has only to look through the books supposedly regarded as the epitome of science fiction writing to realise just how inept they are when compared with even the most mediocre mainstream writer. Van Vogt's *Players of Null-A* becomes a piece right out of the comic books; ridiculously characterised and poorly written, it reads like a first draft of some ambitious hack. The same applies to many of the early works of Robert Heinlein and Isaac Asimov, yet they are constantly held up to us as magnificent examples of science fiction writing, when as literature they aren't even on a par with the best detective and thriller novels now written. Some fans are so tightly locked up in their own little microcosms that s-f has swollen out of all importance in their lives—and in some editors, too. Let us not forget that.

One has only to read almost any novel of H. G. Wells, as John Ashcroft has already pointed out, to realise how hopeless even the best science fiction writer is when compared with the great Masters. Masters, I hasten to add, from *outside* the field of the magazines, who write for the hardcover market where one has to possess a certain amount of literary talent as well as a healthy imagination. George Stewart is a recent example, his *Earth Abides* will remain a true classic for some years to come, when all the synthetic media produced by Pohl, del Rey, Anderson and others of that ilk, will be forgotten. And take note that Stewart was a *writer* first and a science fiction writer purely by chance. And he wasn't writing for magazine publication, either.

While it may be forever argued that the works of established literary ' greats ' such as Huxley, Wells and Orwell, to name but a few, have a place in the field of s-f (even if they do dwarf the meagre accomplishments of the magazine writers) it is about time we realised that there is a great deal of difference between what constitutes a modern science fiction novel and its disastrously out-moded magazine counterpart. Not only have the two fields been separated for some years but the gap is widening with every monthly issue of the specialist magazines.

If science fiction is ever to be established as a serious *literary* form it will have to turn to the novel length form before it can hope to gain sufficient recognition to put it on a par even with contemporary detective and thriller fiction. In all its thirty-odd years of existence as a genre, science fiction hasn't yet produced a novelist comparable to, say, John Dickson Carr, Christopher Blake, Edmund Crispin or even somebody as outre as Ian Fleming. These men have made their reputations because of their ability to produce good novels *consistently*, and deserve the position they have won. Compare this to our own field where even a giant such as Arthur Clarke has produced only a handful of novels and where writers of the calibre of Theodore Sturgeon and Algis Budrys are still chained to the paperback field.

All right, then. What about John Wyndham and John Christopher ? And we'd better not let Charles Eric Maine out of our calculations, either. Well, these men have done their job—of a sort. But I have a feeling that they will soon have to bow out for the newer writers, or at least try and overhaul their outmoded styles, particularly this penchant for world-disaster they all cling to so tenaciously. Of course, their publishers probably have a lot to do with this, plus the fact that if they attempted anything more cerebral they would also diminish their audience—and their pay cheques. But they were never really science fiction writers, anyway. At least, not in their novels.

It's no good saying that cerebral, literary science fiction can't be published in hard cover form. One has to look no further than James Blish, himself dreadfully alone in the task of adapting the technique and traditions of magazine science fiction and, applying them with what is perhaps the highest concentration of literary skill and integrity to be seen in science fiction today, has managed to turn out a succession of highly successful

novels. One has but to name : *A Case of Conscience*, *A Clash of Cymbals*, *Earthmen Come Home*, and the fascinating 'juvenile' *The Star Dwellers*, if proof is needed.

So Blish *has* proved that literate science fiction can be written and published. But who will follow his lead ? In his last two novels Robert Heinlein has shown a strong urge to break from the constricting framework of his early work—*Starship Troopers* and *Stranger in a Strange Land* hold a promise of powerful things to come. He could well become the most brilliant novelist to emerge from the ' old ' school—but then, hasn't he always been one of the leaders ?

And what of Brian Aldiss—*Has* the promise been fulfilled ? I doubt it. At the moment he is approaching the writing of s-f with a diligence and imagination one expects from a writer with his right arm deep in the mainstream, but for the most part he is a prophet without honour in his chosen field, which is a good reason why we shall probably not hold him much longer.

So while we have this handful of writers and a few of the newer ones trying to forge new paths, there are very few of the remainder who are even attempting to bring their story-telling techniques into line with other genres. They still prefer to cling to the out-moded intricacy of plot—what E. M. Forster has described as the story that proceeds, ' and then . . . and then . . . and *then*.' Lester del Rey's recent paperback *The Eleventh Commandment* is a case in point—an original (one is tempted to say an *explosive*) idea, channelled into a routine thriller-cum-adventure plot. Contrast this with Blish's treatment of theology in ' *A Case of Conscience* ' and you'll see where the difference lies.

This is one of the weaknesses we must face when considering the future of the science fiction novel. The magazines may be eclipsed by the mass market paperbacks, but we can be assured that the new form will automatically inherit the tricks of its predecessors, so we can expect pocket novels as inferior in quality as we could the stories of old, simply because they are aimed at the *same* market. One can only hope that the occasional exception like Sturgeon's *Venus Plus X* and Budry's *Rogue Moon* will continue.

The crucial point is, of course, that the majority of science fiction writers are incapable of writing anything above the level of the standardised action-adventure plot, so if there is to be an overnight revolution in the style of magazine science fiction

writing, I for one would certainly like to know just *where* it is going to come from, and from *whom*. But a beginning has been made. At least two editors, John Carnell and Avram Davidson, have exhibited that they are willing to gamble on the occasional outre tale, but a raindrop is a long way from a flood.

The future of science fiction as literature, then, would seem to be in the hands of writers like Blish and Aldiss and Heinlein and, possibly, Sturgeon, although there are signs that he has been writing for the magazines far too long. And it is particularly indicative of how rapid the foetus of science fiction has grown in the past few years, when we can see some writers tiring of the field and moving on to become successful mainstream novelists. It would be hard to imagine any of the practitioners of the so-called Fabulous Thirties (domiciled in the Gernsback and Tremaine magazines) trying this trick ! But today's writers, the best of them, *have* done it. People like Ray Bradbury, Sprague de Camp, Jack Vance, Edgar Pangborn (perhaps the most brilliant example. Read *The Trial of Callista Blake* and see what I mean), Alfred Bester and Algis Budrys.

As for the position of the magazines in the New Order, Baxter would have editors encourage ' mood and emotion ' short stories. Well, that's a fine idea, as long as we are not flooded with a tidal wave of those moody, tasteless, odourless and eminently forgettable trivia that have clouded many a page of the American magazines for far too long. A case of reading ' domestic ' into the words ' mood ' and ' emotion,' perhaps ? There is no reason why a plotless story should not contain as much meat for the reader to dig into as the ancient cliff-hanger type of serial still encouraged and propagated by the editor of one American magazine in particular, and add a bonus of cerebral and emotional fireworks to satisfy the most avid fan. It all depends how well it is done. Doesn't it *always* ?

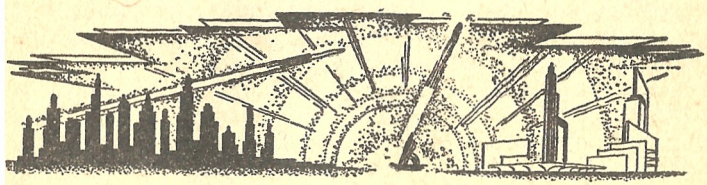
But take the case of writers like John Rackham and Kenneth Bulmer and some of the more familiar names that grace these particular pages. I can't imagine either of them turning out an anti-short story or novelette in an advanced style, or Phillip High or Steve Hall writing a penetrating, stream of consciousness narrative, although I am willing and eager to be surprised out of my wits if they do. But as Edward Mackin pointed out so well recently, why don't they really *imagine* ?

These are the thoughts of one who has known and admired all that is best in science fiction for fifteen years. Not so long as more respected names in the field, but long enough to form an affection for its unique merits and an acute awareness of its shortcomings. In all that time I have accumulated very few science fiction books that I feel ought to be placed shoulder to shoulder to stand the test of time. Sturgeon's *More Than Human* would be one, and Bradbury's *Silver Locusts ; Earth Abides*, Miller's *Canticle For Leibowitz* and Blish's *Case of Conscience* and *Earthmen Come Home* have also earned a place of honour. They are some of the genuine milestones in the field. But I give short shift to such pretentious twaddle as Zenna Henderson's *Pilgrimage*, Sheckley's *Status Civilisation* and del Rey's *Eleventh Commandment*, while retaining a good word for the more impressive failures the field has produced, novels like *Venus Plus X*, *Starship Troopers*, *Stranger in a Strange Land*, Aldiss' *Hothouse* and particularly *Minor Operation*, with its brave attempt to put ' normal ' human beings into s-f and not the ' knotted pine ' stereotype, and, when I wish to relax for a few hours, I will *still* turn to an unpretentious science fiction novel other than anything else.

Science fiction has been likened to jazz a number of times. I'd like to do so again, because I *like* this feeling of getting in on the ground floor with something new, and watching it grow and feel its growing pains, and doing what *I* can to see that it continues to grow, and not drive barren roots in somewhere along the way. But I have never turned a blind eye towards its shortcomings, and never shall.

It seems strangely out of place that science fiction, of all forms of imaginative literature, should not be sorely in need of a sense of importance, but more necessarily, a sense of proportion.

Lee Harding



Dear John,

The first few pages of Lan Wright's recent Guest Editorial are fine—all good sense, especially that comment on the fact that most writers produce stories more for their own personal pleasure than for profit. However, pretty soon after that, we start to hit the snags. This matter of attracting new readers and so on—I do think Wright has gone a little off the rails there. I should have thought it was obvious that literate and fresh new ideas in science fiction will attract people to the magazines that print those ideas. This is proved over and over again by the popularity of high-quality s-f prozines over the low-quality publications. Take *New Worlds Science Fiction* as an example. During the years when there were a number of s-f magazines being published in Britain, only *New Worlds* consistently published literate professional science fiction. Now, when things are thin, it is the only magazine still surviving. It has even flourished in conditions that other publishers apparently felt insupportable. To my mind, this proves that quality is its own reward as far as magazine fiction is concerned.

The next point that makes itself felt is the mention of s-f readers " wanting entertainment." S-f's alleged competitors, " westerns and romances " are dragged up again. I'm sorry Wright doesn't think the average s-f reader mentally superior to the reader of " westerns and romances." However, that is a matter of personal opinion. I do object, though, to his failure to look into this matter of bulk readership before publishing his views. It's a hard indisputable fact that " westerns and romances " long ago ceased to be competition for science fiction (assuming that they ever were competition, which I often doubt). In any given month, I can find seven or eight science fiction magazines on sale at the local news-agents, plus a horde of comics on s-f themes, paperbacks, scientific slicks with semi-s-f material and other associational

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publications. But there isn't one regular western magazine, and the " romances " are confined to a few slicks of the "True Confession" type and a number of comic books enjoying, as a rule, modest sales. The same situation is, I'm sure, true of British agencies.

On this evidence, I think it's obvious that the sales of s-f magazines far exceed those of other popular fiction magazines. Therefore, they must sell to a special readership with special requirements, and not just to a section of the great mass market.

I was especially surprised to see the disparaging mention made of Robert Heinlein's recent novels, and especially *Starship Troopers*. The nonsense about " hysterical branding " " idiotic search for a 'hidden meaning' " etc. struck me as being quite uncalled for and in the worst possible taste. When Wright says, " To my knowledge, Mr. Heinlein has not replied to all the pseudo-intellectual drivel . . .," he betrays his ignorance of the s-f field and the personalities in it. Of course Mr. Heinlein has commented on the criticisms and evaluations made of his last two novels, *Starship Troopers* and *Stranger in a Strange Land.* He appeared at the last two international Science Fiction Conventions in Seattle and Chicago and spoke at both of them on the philosophy of his writing. He recently wrote to the editor of a fan journal praising an article by one of the magazine's contributors on *Stranger in a Strange Land.* His new novel, *The Glory Road*, is quite frankly a work designed to stir up controversy, a point he has made a number of times in private conversation recently. Heinlein is a serious novelist with ideas to express and theses to expound. The suggestion that he writes nothing but " rattling good adventure stories " is so ridiculous that I am rather sorry I even bothered to produce evidence to the contrary.

After the mention of Heinlein, Wright's essay degenerates into a string of mis-statements, errors in logic, fallacies and misreadings. George Orwell was " a political satirist whose books were largely ignored until ' 1984 ' was popularised "— and yet he appears in every reputable history of English Literature as an important novelist of the pre-war period. His books *Coming up for Air*, *Keep the Aspidistra Flying*, *Homage to Catalonia*, etc., have no noticeable political bias, and are all quite conventional novels on universal themes. It is as ridiculous to judge Orwell by ' 1984 ' as it is to judge Aldous Huxley by *Brave New World* or Wells by *The Time*

Machine. In every case, the books are not even remotely typical of the author's work.

" Critics . . . are frustrated fanatics " must rank as one of the most fatuous statements ever published. In a few careless words, Wright condemns some of the finest intellects the world has ever known. Out they go—T.S. Eliot, Alexander Pope, George Bernard Shaw, William Hazlitt, Ezra Pound, William Empson, D. H. Lawrence, Sartre, Arnold, Addison, Lamb, James, Leavis, Dryden . . . the greatest writers and the most incisive minds of the last three centuries ; all of them "frustrated fanatics."

The quote from John W. Campbell doesn't need refutation—one only has to read a recent *Analog* editorial to see that the Campbell of the 1954 London Convention is a vastly different Campbell to that editing the magazine now.

The final paragraph sums it all up perfectly. It's the oldest argument in the world ; " The eggheads are ganging up on us. Let's all just sit here, heads down in the trough, and try to forget about them." Maybe a lot of us don't write in the hope that people will listen to our ideas and perhaps take notice of them, but some of us certainly do, and I for one am prepared to give them all the help and encouragement they want. I see no reason why every reasonably-minded writer, Lan Wright included, shouldn't do likewise.

John Baxter,
Sydney, N.S.W.
Australia.

'Gone Away—No known address'

Subscribers are reminded to keep us informed of any change of address to ensure the safe delivery of their copies as far too many issues are returned by the Post Office marked as above. Overseas subscribers are particularly requested to let us known in good time.

The Gollancz Science Fiction Choice for March is Robert Heinlein's **Orphans of the Sky** (Victor Gollancz, 13/6d) which usefully resurrects the two ' starship ' novelettes " Universe " and its sequel " Commonsense " that made such an impact in *Astounding* of the early 40's. At this time the author was among the leaders of the science fiction renaissance, but these stories are hardly vintage Heinlein, comparing crudely to his " future History " series, and shoddily written by current standards (particularly of Heinlein himself). " Universe," nevertheless deserves its place in s-f history as being probably the first to envisage a huge space vessel, lost on an interstellar voyage, a completely automatic and self-sufficient microcosm, in which the descendants of the original crew have degenerated into bloodthirsty warring factions, both human and mutant (remember Joe-Jim the two-headed mutie?) ignorant of their surroundings, until the hero discovers the true purpose of the Ship. An interesting revival.

An equally slimmish volume is William Tenn's **Time in Advance** (Victor Gollancz, 15/-) which was originally a 1958 American paper-back, containing four novelettes from American magazines of the 50's. By far the best is "Firewater" from a 1952 *Astounding*, wherein an engaging human entrepreneur succeeds dangerously in putting an unfathomable alien/human relationship on a sound business footing. The title story, from a 1956 *Galaxy*, suggests an interesting future legal reform whereby intending wrongdoers serve their allotted sentence in some extra-terrestrial convict hell and are then free, if they survive, to commit their crime. " The Sickness " suffers an overdose of ' Red Bogey,' but is rather moving in its story of the illness which strikes down the combined U.S.A.-Soviet Martian expedition, and its surprising result. Another *Galaxy* story " Winthrop Was Stubborn " gives a bizarre but well-conceived picture of the world of the 25th century visited by a

group of citizens from to-day on an exchange basis, and their dilemma in effecting a safe return. Tenn is first and foremost an ideas man, and his writing style is punchily effective in its staccato rhythm matching the torrent of original and superficially logical ideas and concepts.

Science fiction humourless ? Try **When They Come From Space** by Mark Clifton (Dennis Dobson, 15/-), a wonderfully witty send-up of American military bureaucracy dealing with invaders from outer space and extraterrestrial ambassadors—as seen through the eyes of a with-it company personnel director who is drafted by accident into the U.S. Space Navy and does very well for himself, thank you—and humanity, with hilarious results. Gifted writer Clifton has penned a first-rate novel, warm, moving, at times exciting, always deliciously funny and sometimes uncomfortably and bitingly satirical. Recommended.

For his latest collection of short stories, **Dark Tides** (Dennis Dobson, 15/-) Eric Frank Russell has gone back about 10 years or more for those offbeat yarns of his which fitted so admirably in to the *Unknown* type of reading then in vogue. At a guess I would say that after his recent short story collections of pure science fiction, this last dozen stories will have exhausted the extant material not yet in hard cover. In a lesser writer this might have conveyed a barrel-scraping operation, but with Russell it simply means that his wit and invention are restricted to Earthly events (or rather unearthly happenings on Earth !) for a change, for his themes range from the Pied Piper's other activities to monstrous monoliths coming to life, from mutant powers to ghastly retributions for inquisitive humans.

Perhaps his style is a little less polished than of late, but his irrepressible humour is always there, and his mixture of horror with a sense of ridiculousness is a heady brew which must be tasted to be believed.

Leslie Flood

American—Board cover

That big " little " company, Advent : Publishers, of Chicago (*) have added another definitive volume to their list of case histories of s-f, this time Robert (Psycho) Bloch's **The Eighth Stage of Fandom,** a gloriously humorous selection of some 49 witty articles about the fan field—gems culled from 25 years of

gratis contributions to amateur s-f publications, which pull the leg of both amateur and professional alike.

Edited by Earl Kemp and with an introduction by Wilson Tucker, himself a noted wit, the 170 pages bubble with quotable quotes and punchy " That-Was-The-Meek-That-Was " debunking satires. A " must " for all students of the genre which will take its place alongside Damon Knight's *A Sense of Wonder* (old maps of hell) and Sam Moskowitz's *The Immortal Storm* (fandom's west-side story), both from the same publisher.

(*Advent : Publishers, Box 9228, Chicago 90, Illinois, USA. Cloth Bound, $5.00 ; paper Bound, $1.95)

John Carnell

THE LITERARY LINE-UP

Next month's lead story is another intensely interesting Joseph Green story centred round the planet Refuge, against which he is building a colony world background. This time, however, the implications are considerably more sinister when a renegade Earthman descends from the hills and abducts one of the young local inhabitants.

Jim Ballard produces a fine " inner space " story titled " End Game," which is very much in the tradition of his work in *The Drowned World.* Robert Presslie and David Rome will both be present with a short story apiece, plus the fantastic conclusion to E. C. Tubb's serial " Window On The Moon," and a Guest Editorial by John Ashcroft entitled " Beer In The Wine Bottle."

Story ratings for No. 125 were :

1. Lambda I - - - - - - - Colin Kapp
2. Capsid - - - - - - Francis G. Rayer
3. Mood Indigo - - - - - - Russ Markham
4. Transmitter Problem - - - - Joseph Green
5. Meaning - - - - - - - David Rome
6. Operation Survival - - - - - Paul Corey